

THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE

Greg Egan

profiled by Roger Keen

Joyce Carol Oates

interviewed by Robert Parkinson

Stephen King

mentioned by Peter Crowther

extraordinary new stories

Sten Westgard

Tom Piccirilli

Alexander Glass

Antony Mann

Ron Butlin

Paul Leonard

'Superb. Nobody can

afford to miss it'

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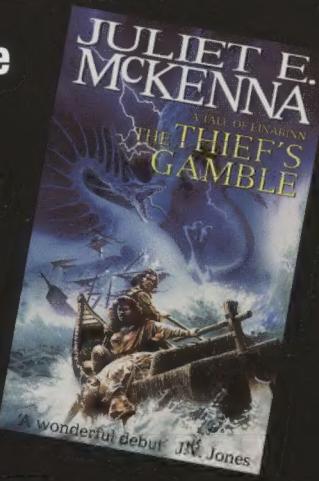
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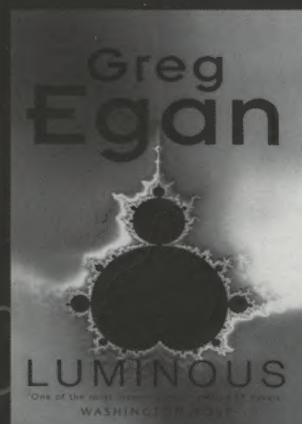
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Page 24: Greg Egan



Page 50: Joyce Carol Oates



Page 16: Metropolis

TTA18 CONTENTS

FICTION

06: THE COLLECTOR OF HANDS

STEN WESTGARD

artwork by Wendy Down

20: VAULT

ANTONY MANN

artwork by Roddy Williams

30: RIVERRUN

PAUL LEONARD

artwork by The Unknown Artist

36: WHERE THE MARTYRED FLESH...

TOM PICCIRILLI

artwork by Wendy Down

42: A STRANGER'S HOUSE

RON BUTLIN

artwork by Roddy Williams

53: THE MARK OF THE BUTTERFLY

ALEXANDER GLASS

artwork by Liam Kemp

FEATURES

05: TWISTED OBSESSIONS

MAT COWARD

16: STYLE & SHADOW

TIM LEES

cinema

24: BEYOND CYBERPUNK

ROGER KEEN

Greg Egan profiled

29: THE DODO HAS LANDED

ALLEN ASHLEY

comment

40: POSTCARDS FROM LENINGRAD

EA JOHNSON

travel

49: CORNERED

PETER CROWTHER

comment

50: HER HEART LAID BARE

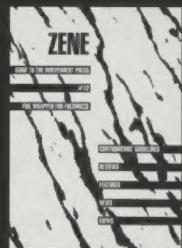
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Joyce Carol Oates interviewed

EDITORIAL

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Postage and packing is absolutely FREE. All offers run until the publication of the next issue of TTA, when they may be renewed, dropped or altered.

Best New Horror

Congratulations to David Langford, whose short story 'Serpent Eggs' from TTA14 has been reprinted in volume nine of Stephen Jones's *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror* (Robinson).

Favourite Story Poll

Despite what we said in last issue's editorial, we are allowing the voting for your favourite six stories from TTA1-16 inclusive to continue a while longer. We've had several responses, but we soon realised that people would need a bit more time to make up their minds – if, indeed, they ever could: a few voters have said that their lists would doubtless be very different if made at a different time. We never really intended the poll to be taken very seriously but we have had some interesting feedback because of it, and tastes sometimes differ quite dramatically. For example, the day after receiving a scathing attack on Clifford Thurlow's 'The Healing' (see letters) another TTA subscriber (male) placed the story third...

Last Rites

The few copies we printed of *Last Rites & Resurrections*, our first paperback collection of stories from TTA, have finally sold out. We've been thinking of doing another collection in book form, albeit on a relatively small scale, this volume covering (approximately) issues 11-20. Like *Last Rites*, and some issues of the magazine itself, it may be loosely themed – it was actually given the working title *Beautiful Freak* until I realised why that phrase had been rattling around inside my head: it's the title of the first Eels album. Your views on this proposed anthology or any other aspect of TTA publishing are very welcome.

This Issue

I hope you approve of the slight changes in design we've put into effect with this issue, which hopefully give the pages a more spacious and attractive look. There are some changes in our regular features too, which I'll let you discover for yourselves. Once again, please let us know what you think. The letters column is at your

disposal. (I won't mention the issue's theme. Answers on a postcard please...)

Coming Soon

I urge you all to be here (and to round up thousands of others) for TTA19, if only to read the best debut story since Martin Simpson's 'Last Rites and Resurrections'. Barry Fishler's 'Heartstrings' is the most powerful story I've read all year, by turns beautiful, sad, wondrous and devastating. We have another remarkable debut by Lynda E Rucker and a number of brilliant stories on hand from Liz Williams, Robert Guffey, James Van Pelt, Jason Gould and others. We have profiles of, and interviews with, the likes of Alasdair Gray, Peter Greenaway, Isabel Allende, Ed Wood, Molly Brown, Martin Amis and Clive Barker. And we have another new recruit to our artwork department: Roddy Williams is already producing some stunning images for TTA (and *Crimewave*).

Crimewave

The first issue of *Crimewave* is out now! A staggeringly good collection of modern crime stories by authors who are household names within (and without) the genre, plus some hotshot new talents: Ian Rankin, Julian Rathbone, Maureen O'Brien, Jerry Sykes, John Moralee, O'Neil De Noux, Martin Simpson and others. The magazine is a rare B5 format with full colour cover and classy paper, with superb illustrations and unbeatable special offers (some of which will be for free books, for example Ian Rankin's hardback novel *Dead Souls*, published by Orion in February 1999), and costs a mere £3 or £11 for a four-issue subscription.

Please support this new venture. Even if you don't normally read crime fiction I personally guarantee that you will enjoy *Crimewave*.

Andy Cox

Your Letters: page 34

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MAT COWARD



TWISTED OBSESSIONS

Who'd have thought that the final, agonising death of the worldwide capitalist system would have turned out to be such a good old laugh-up? It's just a pity really that, due to the collapse of capitalism, they won't be able to issue the collapse of capitalism on video, because I reckon that'd sell like mad, that would, and some swift geezer could make a mint.

As this particular message from a bottle — no, wait a minute, message in a bottle — leaves me, Russia's leading entry for the Collapse of Capitalism Comedy Festival 98 is a witty piece in which the technicians who are in charge of the former Soviet Union's nuclear missiles haven't been paid their wages for four months. It's brilliant, it's hilarious, it's topical and yet timeless. But the thing is, of course, beneath the laughter there lies a serious point. That's how you can tell it's good comedy, that is.

And the serious point is this. I am personally disgusted that the Missile Workers Union has allowed matters to reach such a pass. The art of industrial relations is based on leverage, and on knowing how and when to apply it. If I was the missile workers' chief convener of shop stewards, I reckon, without false modesty, that I could have the whole dispute done and dusted in about four minutes flat, no messing.

Leverage, right? Here are just a few tactics I might employ to force the missile management to get themselves back round the negotiating table where they belong.

First of all, the missile workers could march around in a tight, disciplined circle outside their missile plant, shouting slogans such as 'Be Fair To Missile Workers!' and 'Treat Missile Workers Decently, Please!' and 'Shame On You For Being So Completely Unfair To Missile Workers!' and 'Hoot Your Horn If You Support The Missile Workers!' and 'When Do We Want It? Now!'

Next they could up the tempo with a well-planned programme of letter-writing and petitioning. They could get themselves a stall in the local market (needn't cost much; many markets contain empty stalls which can be had at reduced prices on weekdays), and ask passers-by to sign up to a statement reading 'Be Fair To The Missile Workers! Pay Their Wages! When Do They Want It?' and, if there's room on the piece of paper, 'Now!'

Generally speaking, one will find that most people are of a fair nature, and would wish to oppose unfairness when they are brought face to face with it, at least to the extent of signing a petition. This is particularly true of people who shop in markets, who are frequently keen bargain-hunters.

Then, at a later date (or on the same date, if the trams are still running) the piece of paper with all the shoppers' signatures on it can be presented to a representative of management, with a few carefully selected words of introduction and explanation, such as 'You see that the general public is concerned with the issue of unfairness, and urges you to reconsider your unjust stance. Anyway, cheers for now, must rush, only I just remembered I left a kettle on in one of the missile control rooms'.

Above all, if asked, my advice to the missile workers would be this: make sure you have the public firmly on your side. Take the trouble to explain the nature of the dispute to them, through radio phone-ins, local newspapers and the like. Win their sympathy by outlining to the ordinary housewife in the street the essential importance of the work you do. Use simple, non-technical language, and keep your sense of humour. Say: 'If we don't maintain they missiles, they buggers'll likely go all rusty, which'd be a right shame!'

Sadly, if all else fails, it may be necessary to stage what we in the West call 'a one-day strike'. But please do not attempt this without first checking the details with an authorised union official, as local legal restrictions may limit your range of options.

The Collector of Hands



Sten Westgard

Smiles were better than screams. They took less energy to create. I always painted smiles on my matryoshkas. The dolls I made for my neighbour's son, Besso, possessed my greatest smile yet, a grin like the blade of a soviet sickle.

"Kargi?" I asked Besso, my Georgian still tainted by a Russian accent. My k's and g's were too soft, lacking the native guttural. In any case, the boy didn't respond; the swirling colours of the doll absorbed all his attention.

"Dzalian Kargi," the boy's father replied for him, 'Very good'. "Didi madloba."

"My pleasure, Commander Asanidze," I answered. "I'm glad there's still something I can do. For the children, at least."

The commander frowned, ruffling his son's hair. "In Tbilisi there are Ossetians his age throwing grenades. I'm glad Besso still has time to be a child."

I bent down to the boy's level. "Which doll do you want, Besso?" I asked. Besso simply stared at the *matryoshka*'s face, a smile spreading across his little boy's face. There were actually two copies on the workbench, smooth oval dolls painted with the face of his father. One was for Besso, the other for me. I always kept a copy for my shelves. My walls were crowded with hundreds of them.

The air rumbled with the sound of distant artillery. The boy was oblivious; his eyes remained locked on the twin *matryoshkas*. Asanidze stepped closer to the windows, searching the ridges for signs of Russian guns. Since he had no binoculars, he aimed the scope on his rifle at the slopes.

I glanced out on my eastward panorama of the Caucasus: peaks thrust upward around Gori, glowing orange as the morning sun lifted free of their clutches. Our city sat like a tiny bauble in the valley, a concrete egg in a vast granite nest. So many heights to defend against. Poor Asanidze.

The commander halted in mid-sweep, adjusting focus, gripping the rifle tighter. His lips pressed tight on a held breath.

"What is it?" I asked.

He let out the breath. "Nothing," he said. "A shimmer of the morning light. See for yourself." He offered me the rifle.

The Dragunov felt heavy in my hands. I brought my eye to its scope and scanned the ridges. At first I saw nothing but a glint in the crosshairs, a stirring of dust on the mountain slope. But in a moment the shimmer became an ant, then a stick figure, and finally the growing miniature of a man.

"Do you see something?" the commander asked. I had watched his 'shimmer' too long.

"It's a man," I said. The figure descended a rocky stripe of road, his body bent as though crippled and made silhouette by the dawn. I watched his shifting black shadow cross melt streams bloodied with minerals, moving at a funereal pace. There was something about that gait —

"It's really you, Papa!" Besso shouted, grabbing the first *matryoshka* with both hands. He burst into laughter. "Yuri took your face."

Another echo of manmade thunder reached our ears.

"Make your choice, son," Asanidze said, distracted. He took the rifle back from me, scrutinizing the crests as if he expected the mountains themselves to fire a salvo.

"Take your time, Besso." Unlike his father, I knew the roar of D-30s. We used to call them hut-wreckers, martyr-makers, other filthy names. That was years ago, with different armies, and different mountains...

"He has your helmet and rifle too, Papa," Besso said, inspecting the doll up close. Asanidze's likeness still wore his chief-of-constable's uniform; I hadn't painted military fatigues because he hadn't been issued any. The Georgian army had a hard enough time finding ammunition, much less uniforms or binoculars.

"Look inside," I said. I couldn't help it. The boy was so happy, his smile so broad, it brought warmth back into my heart. In all of Gori, no one had smiled like Besso in months.

Asanidze gave me a sharp look. "He should get back to the shelter. Vaja is waiting there now."

"Those guns are aiming at Tbilisi, not here," I suggested. "It's premature to start living underground."

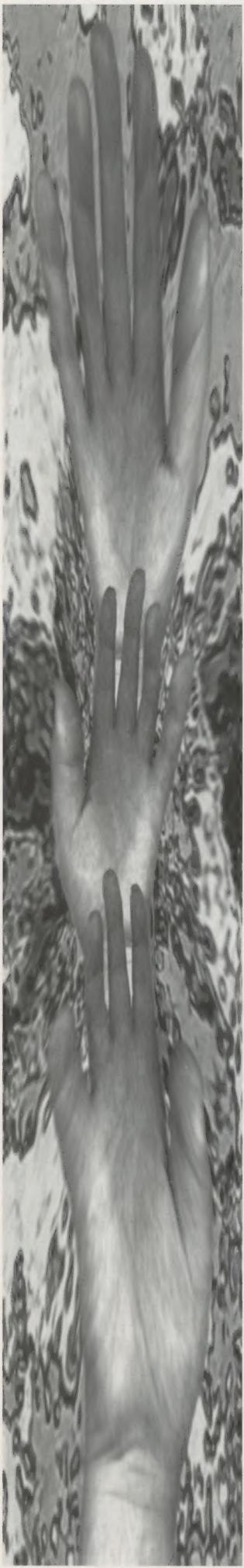
The commander cleared his throat. "I should return to the defences. Those guns will be here soon enough. I left Iosif in charge and God help us if we're — "

There was a loud pop. Both the commander and I jumped, but then Besso let out a peal of laughter. He had opened the *matryoshka*, splitting his father in half.

"Look, Papa!" Besso cried, revealing the doll of his mother nested snugly inside.

Asanidze tore his gaze from the windows. It took a moment, but he smiled. "It's beautiful," he said quietly. "Sweet Vaja."





The boy grinned. He had figured out the trick of opening the dolls. In quick succession, Besso pried open Vaja, his older brother, Iosif, finally reaching the tiny replica of himself. Each of them banged onto the floor.

"Be careful, son," Asanidze chided. "This is the only toy you'll get for a while. It has to last."

"Watch me fly!" Besso said, swinging his wooden self in a triumphant arc.

"So this is the one you want?" I asked.

Besso didn't answer. He was caught in the spell of his wooden family, their hollow tops rolling around his feet. I picked up the other doll and placed it with the others. Asanidze and his family made a fine addition to my shelves. Where there weren't cans of paint and varnish, there were dolls, row after row, the citizenry of Gori to scale. My friends looked back at me with the smiles I had made, a sea of unblinking eyes and waves of smiles.

"You have to take some of these off, you know," Asanidze said, resting his gun on my workbench. He pointed at one *matryoshka*, then another. "Giorgi there, he and his brother joined the Ossetians. Mekhta took his family west to the Abkhazians. And Nadezhda, she — "

"The war will cease," I interrupted. "We'll reunite."

"A dollmaker can be optimistic. I am not allowed to hope."

"It won't come to that." If the fighting did come, I knew Asanidze would lose. He stood a chance against the Ossetian Guard alone, but the Russians had intervened on their side, giving them weapons, supplies, advice. Even the *mujahidin* had never held a city against the Red Army, and Asanidze's militia hardly approached the toughness of mountain guerrillas. Gori would fall and the fighting would grow much worse. Unless I helped. Unless I began the work again...

No. Asanidze was right. Dollmakers could be optimistic. Out of fuse and wire, my old self might have kept the war at bay. The *Afgantsi* veteran might have brought the war to Ossetian creches, keeping the frontlines at their nurseries instead of at Gori's doorstep, but that man no longer existed. I had sloughed him off with the Afghan war. Now I made smiles with chisel and brush. As long as I had staves for my lathe and paint for my brushes, there would be *matryoshkas* and peace for Gori.

A concussion wave shook the walls. Stronger this time. The dolls quivered, curved bodies undulating, trembling like a frightened crowd. The commander and I exchanged worried glances. That was here in Gori.

"Can you get him to the shelter?" Asanidze asked.

I nodded. The commander was out the door. I heard the crackle of his radio echo up the stairwell. Unaware, Besso knocked his dolls together. He had spent so much time around his father and the militia he had grown used to guns and explosions.

"Come, Besso," I said. "You've got to show the others downstairs your new toy."

"I want to stay," Besso protested. "I want to play with the other dolls, too."

"Not right now," I said, hastily reassembling the doll. "You can come back later. I'll let you play with all the other dolls."

"Mine is the best."

"The best in the world," I agreed.

Another explosion rattled the windowpanes. The window showed a column of smoke to the east, drifting up between snow-topped peaks.

"Hold on to your *matryoshka* now." I picked up Besso, my old back protesting. We joined the torrent of people heading down the stairs. A parade of the doll faces rushed past; in the flesh, they had no smiles, only grim looks and fearful eyes. Their hasty elbows jostled my sides. Their clumsy feet bumped my shins. Their frightened faces brought the boy out of his reverie.

"Where's Papa?" he asked, face creasing, beginning to realize now.

"It's all right, Besso. Your papa had to leave but he'll be back soon."

We reached the basement a minute later. Vaja was there, her face pale, lips pressed in apprehension. She spread a small blanket over the dank concrete floor. The old shelter smelled of mould and disuse. They had built these long ago to save us from American missiles; now we used them to hide from Russian bombs.

Soon the shelter was filled to overflowing with mothers and children and men too old to fight. Vaja gasped every time the ground shook. She pressed Besso to her chest, as other mothers did the same with their children, patting, cooing, rocking back and forth. The children would not be consoled. Within minutes, the walls reverberated with their wails, drowning out the sounds of the bombardment. I felt I would go mad.

"Why did he go? Why did he leave me?" Besso said, succumbing to fear, springing tears from his eyes. Children's tears flowed so fast and clear, like water down a mountain spring.

I picked up his *matryoshka*. "Because we are like your new toy, Besso. Once we lived inside a larger place. Georgia was a small part within the Soviet Union, the CIS, Russia. We nested inside them until we could throw off their shell. But inside of us are even smaller parts: Ossetia, Svaneti, and Abkhazia, and they want to throw off our shell. We all want to stand alone, Besso — to be our own dolls. That's what your father is doing now."

Besso's face screwed up in confusion. "Fighting for my doll?"

"Fighting for Georgia."

"He's fighting for you and me," Vaja said, "and you must be as brave."

I felt the stares. My neighbours did not approve of the explanation. Their eyes accused me. A month ago they would have called me Old Yuri; two months ago, they would have begged me to let them pose, exchanging a smile for a *matryoshka*. But in the middle of the shelling, they forgot. Now their grimaces said, 'You are a Russian and these are your bombs hurting us'.

I could stand it no longer. I headed upstairs.

I could never sit through a bombardment, not even a distant one. It made no sense to me, all of us lying in our bunks, waiting for a rocket to crash into the barracks. Every night they bunched us together inside coils of barbed wire and trenches and minefields — all to make a better target for the *mujahidin*. The generals and colonels who had ordered us about remained safe inside the USSR; we were only bits of colour on their maps, circles and squares that meant less than toy soldiers to them.

Lying helpless and angry, my bunk damp with my sweat, waiting for the deadly impact, I realized how we would have to fight them. We needed more than a veneer of mines around Red Army bullseyes. Mine the roads. Mine the fields. Mine every surface of the country: Pressure plates, Trip wires, Fragmentation. High explosive. Coat every square metre of earth with mines. Make each *mujahidin* step their last.

It worked so well we didn't need to stay and fight.

I reached my apartment. The artillery was now a constant roar, incoming rounds amplified and distorted by the mountains. My dolls rocked back and forth, rattling against each other. Still, they never lost their grins. I looked at the quivering dolls, picturing their fleshy counterparts. While an entire army encircled Gori, Asanidze prepared to defend the city with a few thousand men.

I picked up Asanidze's rifle. He had left it behind in his haste. The Dragunov's touch felt more comfortable than before. I didn't check the action or unlatch the safety. All I wanted was the scope. Cradling it in my arms, I took the stairwell to the roof.

Plaster corridor gave way to a horizon of rock; the white peaks looked like jaws preparing to digest our city. I pointed the rifle toward our lines. Past the outskirts of Gori, Asanidze had thrown up a perimeter of bunkers and slit trenches — the equivalent of road bumps on the flat, rocky plain. Beyond that lay swaths of impotent mines, obvious and ill-placed to my expert eye. Gori needed deep lines of defense and their commander had built a circle of toll booths bristling with Dashikas. But against the Ossetians, a Maginot circle just might work.

The artillery had gone silent. The Ossetian guns were probably reloading, recalibrating, moving for their next salvo. Plumes of smoke marked their previous visits, harassing fire intended to disrupt and unnerve. In the quiet, I remembered the stranger on the rocky slope and aimed the Dragunov to where I last spotted him.

The scope revealed a black cloak with long, dangling sleeves, a heavy pack that gave the stranger his humped appearance and a halting pace. He hadn't stopped at all. In fact, he had reached the boundary where the unmarked minefield began. Tank and antipersonnel explosives lodged beneath gravel and dirt waited for the burden-bearing fool to step on a pressure plate or draw too close to a wire. Any moment...

The man lived. He advanced, step after step like a wound-up toy, growing larger and larger, detonating nothing. I watched, dumbfounded, as the stranger cleared the minefield. The man had gotten through unscathed.

Wind tore at the stranger's cloak, drawing back the hood to reveal a round, flat-topped hat, like the bottom lip of an artillery shell. A Pushtun cap. Even from a distance, I felt the weight of the stranger's eyes, a black stare as sharp as the peaks. *Mujahidin* eyes.

An Afghan here in Gori!

A flash dazzled my vision. Then more. I blinked as the roar of the explosions reached my ears seconds later. Mortar rounds traced up the valley, shellbursts stepping their way toward the defences. When my vision returned, I spotted a dozen or more armoured personnel carriers clearing the ridge. The *BroneTransportr* darted into the valley, tearing





down the highway like eight-wheeled iron beetles. Recklessly, they drove straight toward the mines, heading for the same spot where the Afghan was crossing.

I pointed the scope again. Where the Afghan had been, there were only clouds of mortar smoke.

Asanidze's Dashikas barked their response. Too quickly — the Ossetians were still out of range. The BTRs reminded me of toy radio cars guided by little boys. They bounced over the broken fields, steering without finesse, only speed and dumb courage. Ossetian colours had been hastily painted over red stars. Their gunners fired as wildly as our own.

The first BTR reached the minefield; it disappeared in a burst of flame. A second broke in half, the top thrown into the air as explosions consumed its undercarriage. A blast flipped the third vehicle on its side, as if it had been abruptly slapped by a great invisible hand. The rest of the BTRs followed, trying to advance in the wake of their predecessors. Metal and smoke devoured them.

Moments later, survivors emerged from the burning hulks. Dazed men in jeans and helmets jumped from the flaming wrecks. Some held their hands up, waving away smoke, trying to signal their comrades, trying to extinguish smouldering clothes, trying to capitulate. Others took cover behind the wreckage, firing at Asanidze's militia. The Dashikas of Gori barked again, this time with great effect. Bullets tossed the Ossetians about like rag dolls. It was over in a minute. In the silence after the shooting, I heard the cheers of Asanidze's militia.

But it hadn't been a battle. A skirmish, at best, possibly even a diversion. The youth of Ossetia and Gori had tried to prove who is the bravest, who could keep their hand above the fire.

I saw no sign of the Afghan. The BTRs had tried to cross the same ground as he did. But where he had passed through untouched, the Ossetians had met with disaster.

With the commander's Dragunov slung over my shoulder, I walked through the streets of Gori. The basements and bomb shelters gradually released their prisoners. Luckily, the graveyards hadn't claimed anyone and the buildings had resisted the urge to become rubble.

I was only going to return Asanidze's rifle, I told myself. He would want it back. I probably only imagined that the stranger was an Afghan. In any case, he wouldn't have survived the firefight. Not caught out in the open like that.

The streets were losing the gild of morning as I headed east. I crossed the main square, passing beneath its alabaster statue. No fear emanated from those granite eyes. He had not flinched during the bombardment. Stalin's smooth face looked down at me, a slight smile peeking out beneath his chiseled mustache. It was a knowing grin, as if the long-dead ruler knew his hometown had forgiven him, as I had hoped that they would forgive me.

Perhaps inspired by the statue's example, people had filled the square again, seeking food, haggling unsuccessfully with Azeri merchants. With every boom in the distance, and the occasional trails of smoke, the prices flew higher again.

No one challenged me when I reached the lines. There was no rear guard. The youngest soldiers stood around in clusters, chain-smoking and laughing behind the cover of the bunkers. They looked like schoolboys on a playground. Kids on a class excursion. Older men sat along the edge of their trenches, legs dangling into the holes, cradling rifles and staring blankly out toward the highway, where some idiot was poking through the smoking wrecks. A few enterprising soldiers were gathering rocks, reinforcing the sandbagged emplacements. One of them directed me to Asanidze's bunker.

I had to admire the commander; he led from the front. When I entered, I saw that his mood had improved since the morning attack.

"Come to congratulate us?" he asked. "Some of the men think the war is already over."

"I wanted to return this," I said, handing Asanidze the rifle. As I reassured him about Vaja and Besso, a silhouette appeared in the bunker entrance — a wide, muscular shadow, bristling with Kalashnikovs.

"Three more salvaged, Father," Iosif said, stacking the rifles against the wall. "If only the Ossetians would attack more often, we could be well equipped."

The young man finally noticed me. He stepped closer and I saw his boxer's face: sunken eyes, a blunt nose already marked by brawls. His eyes flicked over me, sizing me up for muscle and speed.

"It has been a while since I've seen you, Iosif," I said politely. "I had to use a photograph of you to paint your brother's *matryoshka*."

Iosif spat on the ground. "Matryoshkas are Russian dolls."

"Iosif!" Asanidze warned.

"Russian dolls with Georgian faces," I said.

"Russian at heart. Like you."

"You will do well in this war, Iosif," I said, feeling the heat of his stare. "You have the right attitude."

"What did you do before here, anyway?" Iosif asked.

I lied. "I've always been a dollmaker."

Iosif shook his head. "Not what the Arab says."

My chest twitched as my heart doubled its beat. The Afghan had survived.

The commander interrupted. "Iosif, you're dismissed."

Iosif stiffened. "Betraying our positions to your Ossies will get you killed, dollmaker. I don't care who you paint dolls for."

Asanidze shouted, "*Dismissed.*" He glared at his son's back, then he let out a slow breath. "I'm sorry, Yuri. Iosif has enough hate for all our friends as well as our enemies."

"What was he talking about?" I asked, trying not to sound too curious. But if the Afghan was alive, if he knew who I was...

"We captured a bandit of some kind. He's thinner than a Turk, more tan than an Azeri — so Iosif thinks he's an Arab. He knows just enough Russian to ask for an engineer named Yuri. Iosif jumped to a ridiculous conclusion."

I gave a false laugh. "Is this the stranger we spotted this morning?"

Asanidze nodded. "Slipped right through our minefield. And then he reached our lines just as the shelling began. It's a fluke that he survived."

"The bombardment probably drove him mad," I suggested. As quickly as I could, I finished our conversation and said goodbye. Asanidze was busy, and I had to see the Afghan for myself.

Outside the bunker, I asked the nearest soldier where the prisoners were kept. I invoked Asanidze's command. A special interrogation, I explained. The militia had no system of orders or protocols, so my bluff succeeded. I was directed to a small clearing.

The Afghan sat on his pack, encircled by concertina wire with barely enough room to stand. The hastily built enclosure struck me as an upright barbed-wire coffin. It was completely exposed to the elements and any future bombardment, perhaps on purpose. The stranger stood as I approached, his long black sleeves flapping over his hands, whipping in the breeze, catching in the wire.

"You were the hardest to find, dollmaker," he said, in words heavily accented, mauled by a tongue more used to Dari than Russian. "But you must have known you couldn't hide forever. Even in Georgia."

"Who are you?" I demanded. I didn't recognize him, but he was unmistakably Afghan: coal-black eyes lodged in a taut, scorched-almond face. He was also ugly: a beard so ragged it failed to cover the pockmarks on his leathery cheeks.

He gave me a scimitar grin. "I'm one of your devoted admirers. I've followed your work since the very beginning."

"Who are you?" I repeated, trying to think back. A few Afghans had helped me, but they were all dead — killed when we abandoned them or slain later when the regime fell. He could not be a friend.

"Ghazi," he said and made a noise like a cough, a clash of vocal chords. From the flash of brown teeth that followed, I guessed that was meant to be a laugh. Ghazi was Arabic for 'killer of infidels'.

"The war ended long ago, Ghazi," I said, feeling the sweat trickle down my back. "I'm no longer a soldier."

"You may have forgotten who you are, dollmaker," the Afghan said, "but I haven't. I can't." He reached out through the barbed wire strands, pointing his finger.

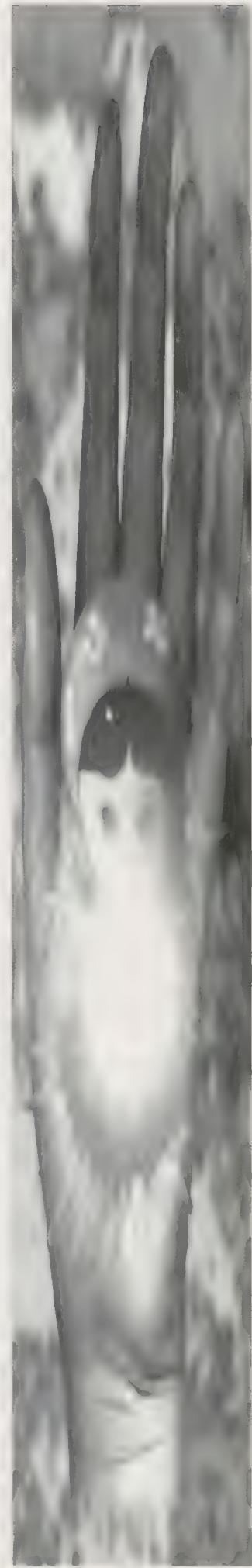
It was then that I noticed his hand. What was left of it. He had only two fingers on his outstretched hand. The rest were just knuckles with nubs of flesh. I sucked in a breath.

"Yes," Ghazi smiled, "you begin to remember."

I saw his other arm. It ended in a knot of scars: a wrist without a hand, an empty space where palm and fingers should have been. The skin of the stump was stretched white by the bones beneath, as if on the verge of breaking. As if his missing hand was about to burst free.

My blood chilled. The pocks on his face were shrapnel scars. I pictured the blast, how the explosive blew off the right hand and sheared fingers off the left, throwing shrapnel into the rest of his body. The parts of his face that hadn't been scarred by metal were etched with years of pain.

He was one of my mine-children.





My face betrayed me. Ghazi choked on a laugh.

"I've changed," I said. "I'm no longer the man you seek." The trembles began in my fingers, my old *Afghantsi* trembles.

"You changed me. Now I will change you, dollmaker."

"You're in no position to threaten me," I told him. But he was. My life — all the good I had done here in Gori — was in jeopardy. This crippled relic could destroy everything.

The Afghan looked at his barbed wire prison and shrugged. "I won't be here long. You forget that I've seen the other side of the ridge. Your bullet-fodder militia will be busy soon enough, too occupied to waste time on me. They'll settle their war and we'll settle ours."

Spoken like a true *mujahidin*, I thought, bravado in the face of death. But the barbed enclosure no longer imprisoned him, rather it shielded me, protected me. The Afghan bent over and reached into his pack. I heard a clinking, like the sound of a sack filled with broken glass. He brought out a jar filled with rust-coloured water. In the water floated a strange pair of pale gloves.

"This is Kostya Borovik," Ghazi said. "He invented the butterfly mine." He shoved the jar between two strands of barbed wire, posing the gloves in midair, as if they were about to applaud.

He took out another jar. "This is Lev Golovin. He created the pen bomb. Would you like to shake his hand?"

I swallowed. They weren't gloves. They were *hands*. As the Afghan bent down again, I saw inside the pack. There were dozens of jars, their hands all the same: white and withered, spinning slowly in fluid. I gasped, trying to get enough air into my lungs, trying to overcome the hollow feeling inside me.

"I've come for the hands," he said, giving me that sword-like smile. His eyes were pure madness, his mind shattered in the same blast that tore his flesh.

I turned from his stare and walked away. I couldn't face him. I had to get away from those hands.

"You can't hide!" he shouted. All I could think about was hiding, fleeing his words, his jars, leaving the past — his, mine, ours — behind me. Maybe no one would listen to him. Maybe no one would believe him.

Suddenly Iosif was there, barring my path. "No one said you could talk with the prisoner."

And I saw the familiar fire in Iosif's eyes. An anger, malleable and unfocused. A solution to my problems. If I directed his wrath, he could cleanse me of my past. If I chose my words carefully, Iosif wouldn't even know what he was doing.

So I snarled at him. "You're right, boy. That prisoner is my spy. If you execute him, I won't be able to report to my Russian masters."

"I'll always find you, dollmaker!" the Afghan shouted.

Iosif stared at me, confused. He heard the seriousness in my tone even as I mocked him.

"Kill him," I said again. "Your father ordered it." Then I left, closing my ears to Ghazi's shouts and Iosif's taunts. But while I could deafen my ears, I couldn't push away the image of the Afghan's stump. Scars gnarled with age, shrivelling up like his sanity. Up close, the damage looked so much worse.

The generals had sent me photographs, portfolios and albums full of them, each showing gouged flesh, torn fingers, jagged stumps. My superiors were ecstatic; they wanted to share the overwhelming evidence of my success — a generation of *mujahidin* laid waste, crippled before they could even lift a rifle.

By that time, we knew we were leaving. The withdrawal was in full swing, but it didn't matter — or rather, it freed us of responsibility. We dumped mines out of our helicopters, shot them out of our artillery, threw them out the back of our trucks. We didn't bother keeping track where we laid them, never counted how many we dispersed. We'd never be back. It wasn't going to be our problem. Sometimes we joked that there wasn't enough ground for all the mines, that there weren't enough stones to hide them under, that we were stacking Afghanistan two-deep from end to end.

Day and night we heard the explosions. Off in the distance, sometimes closer, a single bang that was always followed by nervous laughter. Better them than us, we'd wink. That's one less trigger-finger to worry about. We couldn't pass through a village without seeing stumps. The generals kept sending the photographs. I could have papered the base with shattered children.

Finally I couldn't stomach it, not the hollow-eyed stares of the children, nor the dreams about their phantom limbs and ghostly hands. I got out. The generals let me go — they were that grateful.

Here in Gori the dreams had gone away. Surrounded by smiles, I had been safe. But Ghazi had brought the nightmares back on the tip of his jagged limb.

As I walked away from the Gori defences, I noticed a rumbling. A mechanized tremor filled the air, amplified and dispersed by the mountains, echoes off stone that made the source unclear. Militiamen searched the slopes frantically with squinted eyes. The murmur grew to a hum. I began to discern gunning engines and shifting gears. My pace quickened.

I was barely a hundred metres away when the first shells struck. *Wham!* Like thunderbolts from Heaven, judgement coming down on Gori's left flank. Even from the distance, I heard shouts of alarm, moans erupting from young mouths. The revving grew louder, merging together like one great engine, one vast machine approaching Gori. Beneath my feet, the ground trembled. I broke into a run. A rattle of gunfire sounded from the militia. I looked over my shoulder; they were firing at nothing, shooting simply to drown out the noise.

Another salvo slammed into the fields before the defence lines. The ground heaved. I stumbled. The blasts were closer to the centre this time. The shells hit their marks precisely, clearing the minefields, churning the mines into useless chunks of metal.

As I stood I saw the lead tank crest the ridge. The turret appeared first, like a flagpole, followed by the sloped glacis of the tank's vast hull. A mountain unto itself, the tank growled and belched smoke as it began to descend. Four more appeared behind it, then ten, then thirty — metallic bulges that gleamed in the afternoon sun. The whole ridge came alive, flowing like an avalanche down toward Gori. I was awed by the sight, by the shriek-roar of the diesels and their stridulating treads.

The first tank's gun puffed smoke. The air keened. A bunker disappeared. Grotesque magic. Where there had been a Dashika and sandbags and a clutch of militia, now there was only a hole with a tongue of flame and smoke.

This was what the *mujahidin* had felt, holding muskets before steel mountains.

The tanks moved patiently. As the artillery paved the way, the tanks slewed, angled, and fired. Bunkers exploded one after another. I could already see the panic in the militia, the abandonment of sandbagged emplacements. The Ossetian tanks had not even reached machine gun range and the Gori defenses were already crumbling.

I ran. I ran even as my old lungs gasped, my old legs cramped. The air was alive with tumbling plaster and flying metal. My *Afghantsi* ears told me when to duck, when to wait for a round to hit, when it was safe to run. Buildings spewed chunks of masonry onto the sidewalk, as if their walls could no longer hold themselves together.

The explosions were too loud for my ears. I no longer heard the blasts; they burst against my eardrums, slammed against my stomach. And under it, I heard the thunder of my exhausted heart and the wheezing of my breath. All around, buildings collapsed into their hollow cores. The militia began to flee.

In the distance, my building stood intact, surrounded by wisps of smoke, far enough from the overshots, but not for long.

I should have buried my *matryoshkas*. The thought of a bomb shattering my dolls, blowing them apart like the soldiers behind me, was unendurable. All my good work obliterated. All those smiles splintered.

I reached my block. My head was dizzy. Smoke billowed out of the bomb shelter. The building seemed to shake and sway, an unsteady white pillar. I took the stairs in panting breaths, shoes crunching on broken glass. The blast waves had blown out all the windows.

I found my door ajar. Had I forgotten? No. The lock was broken, fractured by a heavy blow. Inside I heard muffled voices. Holding my breath, I slipped inside. The flat felt different as I crept along its floor. Some of my dolls had fallen from their shelves. I smelled the odours of sweat and gunsmoke.

The talking became clearer. From my workshop came a rough, weary voice.

"That's a beautiful doll," the Afghan said. *Ghazi*. Somehow he had gotten ahead of me. Somehow he had found my home.

A boy's voice responded. "Yuri made it. He's brave like me. He doesn't need to stay in the shelter." It was Besso. The boy had come back to play with my dolls. Instead of me he had met *Ghazi*.

"I had a doll like that once," *Ghazi* said. "It was bright and full of colours and happy faces. But when I touched it, it disappeared with a bang and a cloud of smoke. And it put me to sleep. The next thing I knew, I woke up in the hospital. And they had wrapped bandages around my hands so thick I thought I had grown clubs over my fingers. It felt like lightning bolts were running up my fingers. But when they took off my bandages, my hands were gone."





I crawled into my bedroom, cursing myself. There on the nightstand, a larger *matryoshka*. Silently I opened it. No dolls lay inside — my nine millimetre pistol, instead. A Makarov from earlier days. It was oiled, loaded, ready for this moment. I supposed Ghazi had been right; I had known this day would come.

"Why did the doll hurt you?" Besso asked.

"My father said a wizard made it," Ghazi said, sounding more and more like a madman. "A wizard who gave it the power to steal hands. He lives in a mountain castle with all the stolen hands, forcing them to build more and more dolls. That's where my hands have gone."

The floorboards creaked as I walked down the hallway. If Ghazi noticed, I didn't hear it. He was as caught up in the telling of his story as Besso was in the listening.

"Hundreds of children had their hands stolen," Ghazi said. "Every one of them by the wizard. I've spent my life looking for his castle and all his stolen hands."

"I'll help you get them back," Besso offered. "Yuri will, too."

"I know."

I cleared the door, rushing, aiming, finger on the trigger. I froze. Ghazi held an activated POMZ in his hand. A fragmentation mine on a dead man's switch.

"Yuri!" Besso shouted, smiling, happy to see me. "See how brave I am? I stayed up here like you and Father."

"You are familiar with this," Ghazi said calmly, holding the POMZ in the air like a sceptre. Outside, Kalashnikov echoes grew louder. "A favourite of your Soviet State Arsenal."

I held my aim. The POMZ was only the size of a child's fist but I knew its power. Beneath a metal grid of uncountable shards lay plastic explosives, tied to a fuse that was normally fastened to a trip wire. Ghazi had already triggered it, covering the fuse with his thumb. If it dropped from his hand, or if he lifted his thumb, it would go off, killing me, Ghazi, Besso, and destroying every last *matryoshka*.

Ghazi nodded at the gun. "On the bench." The walls shuddered from another blast. I complied. A pistol couldn't help now. I had to get the POMZ out of his hand.

"Ghazi wants a doll like mine," Besso said. "Can you make him one?"

"I'll make you anything you want, Ghazi. I'll lathe a hundred — a thousand — wooden limbs. I'll make a million dolls if you want."

Ghazi shook his head. "You know, my father had even warned me. I knew not to touch the shiny pens and lighters that I found lying in the road. I saw the helicopters rain mines onto our fields. But when I came upon your *matryoshka*, I forgot everything. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. In all of Afghanistan, there were no eyes more gentle, no smile so warm. Nothing promised joy like that doll. In that moment before I touched it, I was happier than I had ever been."

"You'll kill us all," I said. My breath grew shallow. If I could get close enough, I'd have a chance of grabbing it, throwing it out the window.

"So this is your son?" Ghazi asked.

"No." I edged forward.

"Yuri's not my papa," Besso said. He held up his *matryoshka* again. "My papa is the commander. See?"

Ghazi leaned close to the doll, turning his head to take in Asanidze's face. Somewhere the building took a hit and I staggered forward two steps. Less than a metre between us now.

"Your talent has improved with age, dollmaker," the Afghan said. "Switching to wood was good. It holds the detail better than plastic, though I doubt it carries as much punch. Do you ever fill them up, just to relive the old days?"

"Ghazi, whatever I've done, the boy's not a part of it."

"I want to be a part of it," Besso insisted.

"Sure you do," the Afghan said. He tapped his stump arm along a row of dolls. "I could make you a part of it. I could choose you instead of Yuri."

"Please, Ghazi. You came for me."

Ghazi laughed. "Do you think I'm like you, dollmaker? That I aim at children when I can't hit adults?"

I pleaded with him. "I have money — hidden away."

Suddenly Ghazi ran his arm along the length of the shelf, heaving a score of dolls at me. They crashed to the floor, landing with cracks, or bouncing, breaking into halves and fragments. "I didn't come here to bargain!" he roared. "I came for the hands!"

A rip of bullets pierced the workshop. Ghazi flinched. I lunged for the POMZ. Ghazi saw and tried to pull away. My fist was over the fuse, my other hand against his chest. His hand was too weak, mine too agile. The POMZ was mine. I shoved Ghazi toward the window.

Suddenly the mine sizzled like a struck match. The fuse —

I rolled away, grabbing Besso and falling on top of him, hopelessly trying to get the bench between us and the detonation. The POMZ hit the floor with a hollow *thunk*.

Silence. No explosion. No roar of metal. No tearing of limbs. Besso was crying, crushed and bruised beneath me. Ghazi's laughter rang in my ears. "I'm disappointed, dollmaker. You've spent too much time with real dolls. You can't tell an empty POMZ from a loaded one." I heard the hiss of a knife leaving its sheath.

I looked at the bench, the Makarov. I sprang from the floor, reaching out. Besso slipped out from under me, darting between us, around us as we grappled. Ghazi's knife arced downward. The gun was in my bleeding hand. Besso was screaming, his wails filling my ears. I fired. Blood spouted from the Afghan's chest.

Ghazi shuddered. "I could have killed you anytime, dollmaker." Bloody froth appeared on his lips. "But I wanted to watch —"

I fired again, into his belly, and he toppled to the floor. As Ghazi fell I saw Besso behind him, his chest and arms stained with blood. No, not stained. Bleeding. The bullets had passed through. Besso's eyes locked on the red rush of his wounds, his face ghostly white, a little boy hoping to wake up from a nightmare.

"Yur...Yuri?" Too frightened now to cry, Besso searched my face for some sign of reassurance. He held up his bleeding hand, as if I had to be shown where he hurt.

"It's all right," I said, scooping him up in my arms. "You're going to be fine, Besso." He seemed to weigh so little, such a tiny child. I laid him down on the workbench, my hands wet, slippery with blood. My face felt wet. I tore off my shirt to try and staunch the flow. There were splinters in his wounds; he had been holding his *matryoshka* even at the last.

"You're not a wizard, are you?" Besso whispered, shaking his head, staring up at me with bewildered, widening eyes.

I shook my head, trying to look brave for him.

Then I heard Ghazi's rasp. "I took out the explosive so I could watch, dollmaker. So you could know how it felt." I turned. The Afghan, frail and insubstantial now that he had fallen, reached out for the *matryoshkas*. "But I left it for you...I left you a gift." He looked no larger than a child as he tried to grab a doll. His arms went limp before he reached one.

"Your dolls don't steal, do they?" Besso asked, his words barely above a hiss.

The building swayed as it took another hit; the ceiling groaned and cracks appeared in the plaster walls. My dolls tumbled to the floor like rain. "It's going to be all right, Besso," I said again, as my shirt soaked up his blood. I felt my soul empty into his frozen stare.

Gunfire sang outside the window, but I was numb. My ears had gone deaf. I didn't know how long I had watched Besso when Iosif came through the door, his face flecked red, a smoking rifle in his hands.

"Besso!" Iosif shouted.

I cradled the dead little boy.

Iosif's face crumbled. "No!" he cried, tossing the gun aside, throwing a fist into his mouth to keep from screaming.

"I'm so sorry, Iosif." The words burned my throat. I could paint no smile on this small face. I had done no better here.

Iosif grabbed his brother from my hands and crushed him against his chest. "My brother is dead." Then he gently laid the body down again.

Absently, I looked for Ghazi's body, but he was lost somewhere among the *matryoshkas*.

Iosif put his smoke-blackened hand on his brother's white cheek. "I'll make them pay. I swear to you, little brother."

The familiar words tore into me. I heard them and knew what Iosif would demand, what he was now willing to do. I saw how he would turn mountains into minefields. I knew he could do what I had done.

As Iosif knelt before his brother, sucking in breaths to stave off tears, I began opening the *matryoshkas*, one by one, letting the broken halves fall to the floor, searching for the doll that would end our suffering.

Sten Westgard has a story forthcoming in *Realms of Fantasy* and another, called 'Twilight in Djemaa El Fna', in a future issue of TTA. Other stories have appeared in *Odyssey* #3, *Tomorrow* #8 and #20, and the Datlow & Windling edited fairy tale anthology *Black Swan, White Raven*. Sten is an active SFWA member and attended the 1995 Clarion East. He lives with his wife in Stamford, Connecticut.



Is the commercial cinema a mirror held up to the spirit of its times? An image of our hopes and fears? It's a theory many film historians hold dear. So *Rambo* gives a bearing on the mood of Reagan-age America; the *Alien* films chart the rise (and fall?) of feminism; and all those 50s paranoid sf movies aren't really about giant ants, but fear of Communism and the Bomb. Likewise, the German Expressionist cinema, which flourished in the aftermath of World War I, is now inevitably tied up with the hardships of the post-war years, and the rise of the Nazis.

'Expressionism' was a term first used in France to denote the work of artists like van Gogh and Gauguin – intense, subjective paintings, filled with distorted objects and strange colours; paintings which expressed the artist's feelings, rather than trying to reproduce reality or the effects of light. It was an inward-looking movement, influenced by the Romantics, and, in Germany, by long traditions of philosophy and mysticism. In cinema, perhaps surprisingly, it gained a popular appeal.

'The Expressionist does not see, he has "visions";' remarks Lotte Eisner, in what is still, perhaps, the best book on the subject. 'Facts and objects are nothing in themselves: we need to study their essence rather than their momentary and accidental forms' (Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1969 – first published in Paris, 1952). The outer world must be transmogrified to manifest an inner truth.

As a result, the images on screen are often far from naturalistic. Sets and architecture have been chosen or manipulated for the feeling they convey; objects seem to have a life all of their own; acting is mannered, indicative of mood, hands clawing, shoulders pushing this way and that; while the heavy use of chiaroscuro lighting – sharp highlights amid deep pools of concealing dark – creates a sense of menace, uncertainty, and fragmentation.

In Germany, Expressionism drew on Nordic and Teutonic influences, styling itself a northern European movement, rejecting Mediterranean cultures. In part, this may have represented an attempt to re-establish national pride after the crushing defeat of World War I. Imperialist hopes were, for the moment, dashed, and the country suffered heavy penalties under the Treaty of Versailles. Inflation, insecurity, rebellion and declining living standards marked the times; coupled with a death-obsessed romanticism, it's little wonder that the themes of Expressionist cinema tend to be lurid, sinister – revolving around murder, deceit, and the abuse of power. Freudian theory was by now familiar to



THE SLIPSTREAM CINEMA

STYLE & SHADOWS:

GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM

by

TIM LEES

many intellectuals, and some of the best Expressionist films hinge on the portrayal of unconscious desires, dark forces masked by a respectable bourgeois exterior. The notion of the 'double' crops up time and again – both in the story-lines and, visually, in shadows and mirrors, multiple images suggesting multiple parts of the personality.

Not the first Expressionist film, but surely one of the most interesting, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919) follows the format of a classic horror story. Into a small, tight-knit community comes an outsider, the fairground showman, Caligari (actor Werner Krauss). With his strange clothes, his shuffling walk, his leering and obsequious showman's gestures, he is marked out as a foreigner, a figure of suspicion. (A gypsy or a Jew? In retrospect, the slightest hint of xenophobia takes on significance.) His act presents a kind of freak show featuring Cesare, the 'somnambulist' (Conrad Veidt), a tall, thin, angular figure, dressed in black and with a stark white face. At Caligari's bidding, Cesare wakes to perform feats of strength before the crowd before returning to his box. And yet at night he serves a darker purpose. Under the power of Caligari's mesmerism, he goes out to commit appalling crimes. Thus Caligari can strike down his enemies without lifting a hand himself. Cesare is an extension of his worst desires. The itinerant showman, the underdog, forced to beg and cajole the authorities for necessary permits, crippled physically and morally, can nonetheless revenge himself on a society which loathes him.

So far, so conventional. Yet a strange twist is revealed: Caligari has a double role. As well as the outsider, the fairground barker who terrorizes the town, he is also one of its most respected citizens: the doctor who runs the local mental asylum. Here, Caligari has become a tyrant. The film suggests a rationale for this – that his occult learning has led to his possession by the spirit of an 18th century mystic – but, crucially, as in a dream, the townsfolk fail to link these Jekyll and Hyde figures. Only the hero and narrator of the story, Francis, recognises the source of evil. After a nightmare chase across the rooftops, Caligari is unmasked, order restored – or so it seems.

However, this whole tale has been enclosed in a frame plot. The scene is the asylum, where Francis is telling his story. He is an inmate. Caligari is the benevolent doctor, ready to help him. Has Francis's whole story been a delusion? Is he, in fact, the one who is mad?

Interpreting *Caligari* is difficult, and accounts of its genesis differ greatly. The initial script, by Mayer and Janowitz, is

usually taken as an outright attack on authority, which kills from afar without soiling its own hands. To this was added the present frame plot (in a naturalistic setting, unlike the movie's main story), either to soften the revolutionary political message or, more likely, for commercial reasons, giving the audience an 'explanation' of the strange events portrayed. Yet actually, the frame plot merely adds another level of illusion, leaving us uncertain who to trust. SS Prawer, meanwhile, indicates that a quite different frame plot was originally envisaged, in which the events of the film were to be taken as true, but Caligari looked on as a pitiable, tragic figure whose mind has collapsed under the pressure of work (SS Prawer, *Caligari's Children*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1980).

Whatever the interpretation, it is the sets which most disturb and astonish. The twisting streets of the small medieval town are exaggerated, abstracted, stylised. Houses lean, windows curve and melt, strange shadows spike across the stage, giving a sense of constant tension and anxiety. It is, perhaps, the world viewed through the eyes of a madman. Incongruously, ordinary people go about their business in this strange setting; the furniture, too, is mostly conventional and bourgeois. Only Cesare and Caligari adapt their movements to the setting, one angular and stealthy, the other shuffling, seemingly deformed. The total effect is theatrical – the more so since, to save money, the backgrounds were often painted on canvas. No special lenses or unusual camera angles were employed; the technique is hardly 'filmic' at all. Eisenstein, the great Russian filmmaker, was quick to denounce it, and critics have remained split as to the film's merits ever since. Its power, however, is unquestionable.

Further experiments were made with heavily distorted sets (*Genuine*, 1920; *Von Morgens bis Mitternachts*, 1920; *Raskolnikov*, 1923; *Waxworks*, 1924), but such techniques were frequently gratuitous or merely decorative. A subtler approach was generally preferred; everyday settings lit and filmed in such a way as to seem strange and sinister. In-between places – staircases, corridors – abound, and their significance has caused considerable debate. Eisner (in his 1969 book) points out 'the German fascination with *Werden* (becoming) rather than *Sein* (being)', but concedes they may, after all, just offer striking visual possibilities. The Freudian, Otto Rank, meanwhile, informs us that a staircase represents the sexual act, a corridor or cellar, female genitalia...

Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu*, the first screen *Dracula*, features location shots –



something rare in German cinema at this time. Murnau saw an inherent strangeness of the little Baltic towns he filmed; unexpected camera angles serve to worry and disturb without the need for specially contorted sets. Careful editing and beautifully composed shots – Murnau trained as an art historian – transform the natural landscape into something eerie and foreboding. The crashing waves seem to foretell the vampire's coming; the hills rise up like prison walls. There's trickery, but of a filmic, rather than theatrical nature: gauze draped across the camera lens, stop-motion, even a section of negative spliced in during the journey to the vampire's castle, all lend to the atmosphere of a true horror film.

Like Caligari, the vampire – renamed Count Orlok – is both a monster and a figure of conventional authority. The powers that be bring plague and death. Yet he's no suave, handsome charmer, like so many later screen vampires; rather, an inhuman, goblin figure with pointed ears and knife-like incisors. Still, he maintains an air of sexual menace. As the heroine falls increasingly beneath his sway, we see the vampire's shadow – hunched, deformed, with long, extended fingernails – creep up the stairs towards her room. We see her, in a state which might be either fear or sexual excitement, or a mix of both; the shadow of the vampire's claw extends across her body, closing on her heart, or, as we might read the scene, her breast. (Sexual anxiety has, of course, proved a staple of the horror film. For Murnau, who had homosexual tendencies, there were very real dimensions to it, the pre-1918 German Penal Code presenting a 'blackmailer's charter' *par excellence*).

Not all Expressionist films dealt in fantasy; indeed, Expressionism shaded over into other genres, notably the small-scale 'psychological' drama, and the drama of the street. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924), for example, is a tragic-comedy about a hotel doorman who loses his job and becomes a lavatory attendant; in doing so, he must surrender his smart doorman's uniform. The uniform embodies his whole sense of worth. Its loss is crippling, his dejection absolute. The film employs only a small number of blatantly Expressionist effects, mostly in the dream sequence and after – the enormously distorted hotel doors, a twisted face, the superimposition of gigantic, laughing mouths – but the influence is there throughout. Physical forms are given an emotional significance: in his uniform, the doorman seems to tower above the passers-by; the flash and shine of the hotel's revolving doors contrasts with dark, scurrying shapes of the

pedestrians outside. The film presents a solipsistic world, in which events and characters have meaning only in so far as they impinge on the protagonist's sensibility. The newly-mobile camera pursues the former doorman everywhere, leaving no nuance of his downfall unrevealed.

Murnau returned to fantasy, German metaphysics, and a more conventionally Expressionist form in *Faust* (1926), with its stunning chiaroscuro opening – a demon poised over a small town like a great black cloud – and throughout, his use of lighting seems to warp physical forms without resorting to *Caligari*'s eccentric sets. Many of the elements of the picture will by now seem familiar: fairgrounds, plague, corpses, coffins, mist, steep streets, the innocence of children.

Fritz Lang proved one of the most versatile directors of the period. His heavily stylised *Destiny* (*Der Müde Tod*, 1921), in which a girl bargains with Death to save her lover, foreshadows Bergman's *Seventh Seal*. His crime movies attempted to bring new political and psychological depths to the genre, so that even an improbable 'criminal mastermind' like Dr Mabuse can seem almost human, his counterfeiting scheme uncomfortably close to real life in inflation-ridden Germany. Lang then made the ambitious two-part epic *Die Nibelungen* (1924), with its immense studio sets, including a whole forest of gigantic concrete 'trees'. Why not go on location, as a modern film crew might? To some extent, there were political and practical reasons to stay in the studio; but also, even in these naturalistic sets, Expressionist precepts held strong: landscape itself becomes an adjunct to the mood, raising the tension of each scene, 'landscape imbued with soul'. (Perhaps in this context, Ballard's novels, with their modified terrain and primal characters, might well be seen as a late flowering of Expressionism.)

Today, Lang's best-known work is probably *Metropolis* (1926). Visually still stunning, this ultimate in future cities, with its towering skyscrapers and tiny aircraft, contains darker, mystical components. Lang's first sight of New York inspired the city sets, and his training as an architect is well in evidence. Unlike the flat, theatrical decor found in *Caligari*, everything here looks massive, solid, three dimensional. And yet the shapes are simplified, pared down; design is all important. The windows of enormous office blocks create a checker pattern in the dark. Black silhouettes of workers trudge across the screen against a blaze of light, mist and machinery – like something out of Ridley Scott, but grubbier. A steam whistle goes off, a

sudden flare of light seeming to visualise the sound (*Metropolis*, like all the films discussed so far, is silent – regardless of some later less than tasteful efforts to add sound to it). Even the crowds of extras have been 'architecturalised', as Lang, taking his lead from the theatre, builds them into carefully-shaped masses – not individuals, but evocations of a single mood.

Lang's then wife, Thea von Harbou, wrote the story, and silly and irrational much of it is. Yet as a portrait of a nation's mind-set on the road to fascism, its themes are both revealing and significant: fear of the mob, the faceless hordes of workers; fear of authority, yet longing for a loving, powerful father-figure (who, paradoxically, turns out to be that same authority); all hyped with spectacle, false sentiment, and Biblical allusion to provide a sense of deeper, universal consequence.

The characters suggest the tone: Joh (Jehova?) Frederson, the great industrialist who rules Metropolis; his son, Freder, who rebels and runs away to join the workers in the underground city; saintly Maria, comforter of the oppressed, prophet of the coming messiah – the 'heart' who will mediate between the 'brain' (Joh) and the 'hand' (the workers).

There is also Rotwang, an inventor. Amid these futuristic settings, Rotwang's house seems to come straight from German myth. It's crooked, *Caligari*-like, home for a wizard rather than a scientist, and Rotwang himself is a sinister figure with wild hair and an artificial hand. Significantly, there is a star of David engraved on the pavement outside his home.

With some impressive lighting effects, Rotwang's robot is transformed into a duplicate Maria. The real Maria is pure and virginal; the false one, evil and seductive. The mood is blatantly Old Testament. The city's great machine turns into Moloch, a devouring god. The false Maria, dancing in a Bacchanalian frenzy, stirs the workers to revolt. A Biblical-style flood ensues. Meanwhile, Freder saves the real Maria, and, with amazing ease, a reconciliation is effected between Joh and the workers. Freder, Joh's son, is, of course, the long-promised mediator, the 'heart'.

Character, internal logic, motivation – these are hardly the film's strong points. The ending in particular fails to convince. Some faults are due to poor re-editing, but many hark back to von Harbou's original novel. Critics tend to blame her for the flaws in Lang's work at this time, something her subsequent espousal of the Nazi cause does little to redeem. It's a tribute to Lang and his



designers that the film drives us along by visual power alone.

Nonetheless, it caught the mood of its day. One viewer in particular was deeply moved. Adolf Hitler – that master of the 'architecturalised crowd' – counted *Metropolis* among his favourite films, and wanted Lang as his official film-maker. (Lang, very sensibly, preferred to emigrate.)

It is worth mentioning *M* (1931), perhaps Lang's finest film. Here, classic Expressionist motifs are introduced into a generally naturalistic mode: menacing shadows, staircases, reflections, doubles; figures grouped in stylised, geometric patterns... All this within an almost documentary style, often simply letting us observe the processes of the police department as they try to catch a killer. Technically, this was Lang's first sound film, and he employs the new dimension skilfully: the whistled theme from Grieg signalling the killer's presence; a busy street scene, evoked just by traffic noise; the growing clamour of the off-screen hue and cry, while its victim writhes in fear... Without a trace of gore, this is one of the most disturbing serial killer pictures ever made, one which refuses to absolve us with an easy moral at the end.

The killer, played by plump, ill-looking Peter Lorre, proves to be another double: the rapacious monster hidden in the body of an insignificant and frightened man. Lorre is a sympathetic beast. Hunted by the underworld, put on 'trial' before a makeshift court of criminals and citizens, he turns against the mob accusingly. He's merely sick, he says, and cannot help his crimes; *they*, meanwhile, are an efficient organisation, deliberately designed to kill. Who is more culpable?

In the course of making this film, Lang himself had suffered an uncomfortable political awakening. In 1930 he had announced the picture as *The Murderer is Among Us*. Suddenly he was banned from the studio, and subjected to a series of anonymous threatening letters. Baffled, Lang confronted the studio head, explained that his film would be based on the story of the Dusseldorf killer, Peter Kürten; whereupon the man laughed, said, 'Oh! I see!' and handed him the studio keys. Lang noticed the Nazi insignia on his lapel. The party had assumed that such a title must refer to them...

Expressionism was a short-lived movement, but its influence has been widespread. Like *M*, many films employed Expressionist techniques in naturalistic contexts (eg Pabst's *Pandora's Box*, 1928; von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*, 1930). Even Leni Riefenstahl's corrupt but brilliant

Triumph of the Will (1935), an idealised record of a Nazi rally, employs Expressionist tricks of perspective, careful geometric grouping and design, essentially to make a gang of thugs appear as gods.

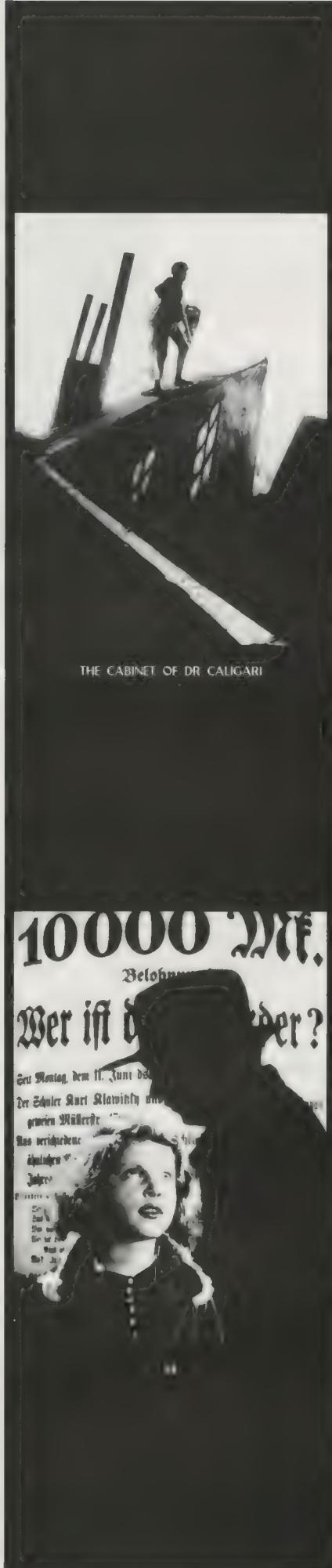
In Hollywood, the influence extended to such highly-stylised films as *Citizen Kane*, and even more so to the horror and *film noir* genres, replete with menacing shadows and dark psychologies. While in recent years, at least two box office hits have offered a decidedly Expressionist approach, both in content, and in looks.

Kim Newman's story *Übermensch* conflated Superman and the Expressionist cinema (Kim Newman, 'Übermensch!' in *New Worlds* Vol.62, No.217, ed David Garnett, Victor Gollancz, London). Yet it's Tim Burton's first two Batman films, *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992), which derive most heavily from the genre. Here are wild, distorted sets, somewhere between *Metropolis* and *Caligari*, seeming to represent the soul of this contorted, crime-ridden, oppressive city; circuses, diseases and deformities; wild acting, Jack Nicholson giving the stand-out turn; doubles galore; and, in homage, a villain by the name of Schreck – after the actor, Max Schreck, who played in *Nosferatu*.

Sadly, so the story goes, subsequent Batman films were then toned down to gain a merchandising tie-in with Macdonald's. If the cinema really does reflect the spirit of its times, the moral is an old one: that the marketplace tends to exalt the bland and mass-produced over the individual, the visionary and eccentric. Nonetheless, I'd speculate that Burton's films will still be watched long after their successors have been left to gather dust.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY:

1914	The Golem dir: Wegener, Glaen
1919	The Cabinet of Dr Caligari dir: Wiene
1920	The Golem(How He Came Into the World) dir: Wegener, Boese
1921	Destiny; Between Worlds dir: Lang
1922	Nosferatu dir: Murnau
1924	The Last Laugh dir: Murnau
1924	Waxworks dir: Leni
1925	The Joyless Street dir: Pabst
1926	Metropolis dir: Lang
1931	M dir: Lang



Parnell took the £20 note straight from the newsagents back to the bank. The woman behind the shop counter had treated him like a criminal, even threatened to ring the police. He hated that: being made to feel guilty for something he hadn't done. Even worse, she had taken delight in his discomfort. She was a compact specimen, twenty-nine or thirty, with streaky blonde hair and a thin face, no doubt pretty to someone, but Parnell found her ugly. Nothing unusual there. Everyone looked ugly to him these days. Maybe it was the incessant drizzle that made their faces seem so flat and unattractive, the shopgirls, the passers-by in the streets. Parnell couldn't remember the last time it had not been raining.

"Just the paper."

Dull-eyed, as bored as Parnell found her boring, the woman had snapped the banknote between her fingers out of habit then swiped it under the eye of the security machine. To her surprise — and Parnell's — the light had flashed red and the buzzer gone off. She had glanced up at him, reset it and tried again. *Beep-beep*. Those in the queue behind him had gawked and craned. His face had reddened and he had felt the heat crawling up the back of his neck. *Beep*.

"I'll have to get the manager," the woman had said, making little effort to hide her pleasure. *Why?* he wondered now, standing outside the bank. Why should it have been such a source of enjoyment? Was her life so miserable that embarrassing a customer constituted a highlight?

"But...but I just this minute came from the bank!" he had stammered.

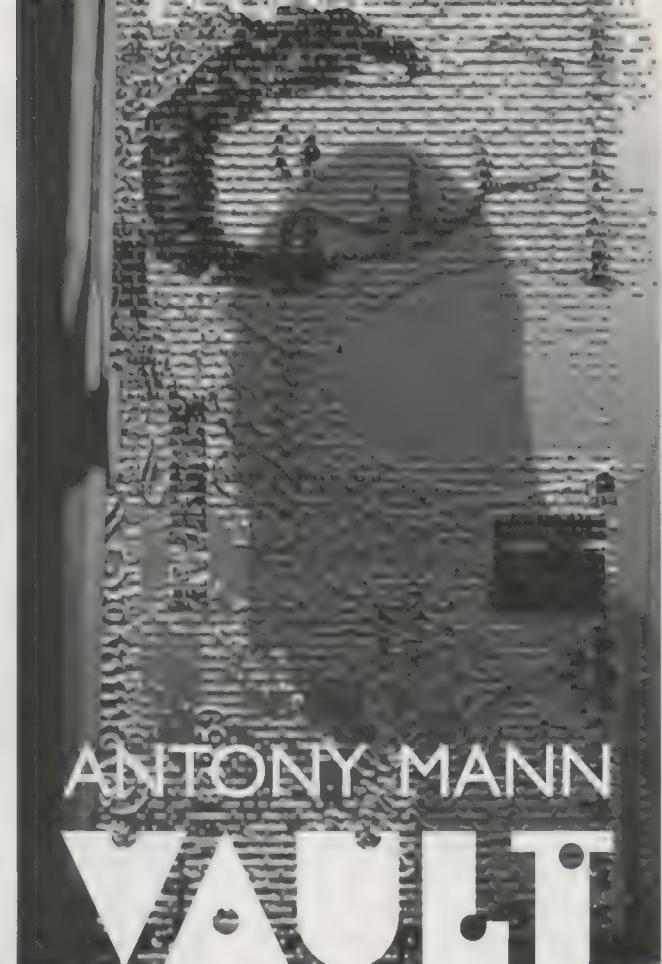
The woman had paused; if it were possible, her face had hardened even more. Clearly, she had disbelieved him. "Store policy requires that the manager contact the police in any instance of —"

But Parnell had lurched forward across the counter, plucking the £20 note from the woman's hand. She had squawked in surprise. It had almost been fun then, dumping his newspaper amidst the sweets and chocolates, deflecting a small boy from his path as he made a break for daylight. The glass door open, he had pushed out into the street and set off down the footpath at a brisk half-trot, dodging umbrella points as they loomed up out of the pedestrian flow. He had almost expected a rallying cry from behind, a posse of the civic-minded spontaneously arising to give chase, but there had been nothing. Not a peep. So much for community spirit.

It must have been a trick of the light, but it seemed to be raining more heavily outside the bank than elsewhere. The facade was brownstone, Georgian he guessed, yet uninspired — now, there was a fitting epitaph for his age, he mused. The Age of Parnell: We achieved little. We were uninspired. Gargoyle faces frowned down at him against a backdrop of relentless grey cloud.

He paused on the step and brushed the water from his shoulders, flicked it from his hat, then entered through the swing doors, blinking against the bright fluorescent glare. It was stuffy inside, airless. The heating was up too high. No doubt it was bank policy. Render the staff semi-conscious. Encourage the public to sweat. Make banking as dreary as possible. Better yet, make it an ordeal.

He noted that the mock-walnut panelling was plastered with those idiot pictures of actors/models with samey haircuts pretending to be families whose happiness was exceeded



only by their smug satisfaction — at having taken out a mortgage with the bank. In contrast, a line of tired-looking customers waited for teller service. That was how they were referred to these days, wasn't it? As customers? As though it were the role of the bank to serve, rather than extract as much money as possible from account-holders who had little choice other than to suffer in silence? *Well, here's one customer who is not satisfied*, Parnell thought grimly as he approached the Enquiries desk.

He took the counterfeit £20 note and his auto-teller receipt from his wallet and placed them on the counter before the man who sat there entering data into a computer terminal. *Wakey-wakey*, thought Parnell. *What have we here? Another slack-shouldered drone in white shirt and nondescript tie?* In truth he was more boy than man, fresh out of college but still ungrown. His cheeks were clear, tinged rosy by the heating.

"This came from your machine out front."

The young man looked up from the screen. "I see."

"No, I don't think you do, Mr Paltrose," said Parnell, peering at the young man's identification tag. "It's counterfeit, and it came from your automatic dispensing machine. I have just now undergone considerable embarrassment trying to change it in the newsagents. I have a good mind to demand compensation for loss of standing in the community."

The young man regarded him with some doubt.

"Oh, that's right," said Parnell drily. "I forgot. You're a bank. You don't make mistakes."

He had not spoken softly, and a couple of the tellers and customers looked in his direction. He stared back at them, but they at once averted their gaze. Ha! There they were, as always — the slumberers, as he thought of them. The great and ugly hordes of the timid and the tired, who would do anything rather than kick up a fuss, who believed in all

this, and were subservient to it: the buildings that housed the ideas that made up their world. Banks, churches, governments, nations. Bow down, bow down, you lovers of mirages. Anyway, what was he supposed to do? Apologise for being right?

"Your account number?" said the man. Parnell handed over his cheque card and waited while his details were keyed into the terminal. Paltrose read off the screen, "According to this, you made a twenty pound withdrawal ten minutes ago."

"That's right."

"And what was the problem?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The problem."

"The problem? The problem? Haven't you been listening to what I've told you?"

The young man handed back Parnell's cheque card, picked up the £20 note and the auto-teller receipt, looked at them with what may or may not have been curiosity, and put them to one side. "Thank you," he said. "Your request has been noted." He turned back to his computer.

Request? The inherently mediocre could hardly be accused of audacity, but perhaps Parnell could make an exception in this boy's case. He regarded Paltrose with an irritated bemusement, but said nothing. At length, the lad looked up once more. "Was there something else?"

"My twenty pounds. You have it. And my receipt."

"You said it came from our auto-teller."

"So it did," said Parnell. "If you intend to keep it, which is fine by me, then you'll have to give me a real twenty in exchange."

"Oh, I can't do that," said the man. "If you ring our helpline, someone would be more than happy to — "

"As it happens, I am self-employed," Parnell interrupted, "which means that, inconvenient though it may be for me to do so, I am at liberty to stand here all day if need be."

Paltrose took the point. With a great yearnful reluctance he handed over the note and the receipt, casting a lingering, wistful look their way as they disappeared back into Parnell's wallet. It would not have surprised Parnell to see a tear creep into the lad's eye. Paltrose indicated a door in the wall at the end of the counter. "Through and down the stairs," he said. "Ms Abercrombie will help you."

"Counterfeit," repeated Parnell.

Ms Abercrombie's lips took it upon themselves to smile without letting the rest of her face know. Her eyes seemed especially ignorant of the fact. Come to think of it, perhaps she can't properly smile, mused Parnell. The skin of her face was waxen, stretched tight across her cheeks from ear to ear. Her grey-brown hair was plastered to the skin of her skull. She was starchy all over.

Parnell held the troublesome bill up to the light, as though demonstrating to an idiot child. "As in, phoney. Fake. A dud."

"I see," she said.

Another who saw — but this one was older, in an advanced state of decay. Did that mean that she had seen more, or less? Parnell wondered, amusing himself with his own cleverness. Or did they all see the same thing, no matter what it was they were looking at? Root and branch — ha! was that a joke? — they were all of the same tree.

It was hotter down here, and damp. There were no windows of course, only plain wooden office panels succumb-

ing to the appetites of various strains of mould and mildew, like abstract floral wallpaper in relief. It saved on decorating, he supposed. But where was the ventilation duct? He could see none. Something smelt sweetly rank, like compost. It was either the fungal growths or Ms Abercrombie — he couldn't tell which. Or maybe it was the rotting carpet. He wondered how much of it he would carry away with him on the soles of his shoes.

Her shoulder creaked as she stretched out an arm. He thought for a moment the bone was going to snap into shards, there inside her withered flesh, but somehow it held together. No wonder she had declined to shake hands. She took the note and held it up to the light, just as he had. Was she mocking him? "Phoney," she said. "Fake. A dud."

"I think I knew that already," said Parnell.

"And what was the problem?"

Oh, they were good here, there was no denying that. It was probably genetic: natural selection for obtuseness in the face of even the simplest request. These days, they had aptitude tests for that sort of thing. Can you keep the cogs behind your eyes well-oiled and quiet? Can you keep a straight face? This Abercrombie...thing. He examined her with renewed distaste. Neither her voice nor her expression had even begun to hint at the bank's liability. Hell, she didn't remind him remotely of anyone he knew, and still he disliked her.

"The problem is, that I withdrew that note from your auto-teller."

"And you maintain that you withdrew this note from our auto-teller?"

Unfazed, he tried a different tack. "Supposing I had withdrawn the note from your auto-teller. What would you do? Give me a proper twenty? A year's supply of credit slips? Some of those plastic change bags of which you can never have too few?"

"We'd all like twenty pounds, Mr Parnell," she said, neglecting once again to emote. "The trouble is, it's your word against ours."

"Forgive me," he said, "but I don't think I've heard your word yet. Do you have a policy on this or are you making it up as you go along?"

She took a pad and pen from the desk drawer and began to write. Parnell watched as she drew a series of small rectangles of varying sizes, connected them at random by lines both dotted and unbroken, then filled them in with letters and numbers apparently also selected in haphazard fashion.

"Shorthand of the damned, is it?" he muttered to himself.

"I've referred you to Mr Dobson." She handed him the paper and the counterfeit twenty. "Through and down the stairs."

The receptionist took his referral then directed him from her counter to the empty green chairs along the wall, from which vantage point he had ample opportunity to size her up. There was flesh on her bones at least — and a pleasing amount at that — but she was wall-eyed. Curiously, she had let blonde curls grow down to obscure the normality, leaving the crooked side of her face in plain view. She had been cranking some kind of machine when he had come in, and now she returned to her task. Parnell could see it from where he sat. It resembled an old-style manual typewriter, but it was almost as though such had been turned inside out. There were no keys, only hammers, and instead

of rising through an arc and striking paper, they bent upwards in the middle, jointed like a spider's legs, and rippled from one side of the contraption to the other as she cranked. It made no sound, only clicking once to signal the operation was complete.

"Keep you busy, do they?" he said idly.

Her crooked eye fixed him with a blank look. It was a pity. For a change, he might have welcomed a less antagonistic conversation. In his experience, the menial buffer staff did not invest so much intellectual (or emotional) energy in the concept of whatever corporation they served. Hence they were less likely to defend it so vigorously.

There was a crank handle on the other side of the machine too. She turned it, and the hammers rose up and rippled back over. She repeated the whole process twice more before speaking. "Mr Dobson, was it?"

"That's right."

"And what was the problem?"

"I withdrew a counterfeit twenty pound note from your auto-teller."

"I see."

That made three out of three.

He glanced around the room. It was L-shaped, lit softly by antiquated lamps on small stands. There was one on the receptionist's counter, too. The shades even had tassels. The green chairs were also antique, and (he guessed intentionally) uncomfortable. Split by a low table, they sat in a row of four along the L's perpendicular, opposite the counter. In the middle of the base of the horizontal was another door. It was hot down here too, but drier than had been Ms Abercrombie's office. The walls were of the same wood panelling, but they were clean and hung with detailed black and sepia prints of animals that Parnell did not recognise. The floor was parquetry, polished to reflect all.

He picked up the magazine that was on the table beside him. It was not one he had seen before: *Structures of Altered Sense*, No. 2, Vol. 7. There was no editorial or contents page, so he turned to the first article, by someone called EP Edwall: 'A Discourse on the Nature of Solid Fragment. To truncate what is elevated to higher lightness involves coursing only by means indicated in the previous issue's explanatory diagrams. If we were to consider the possibility of such an eventuality it could only be in the context of further progress, or "back-walling", as it has been called elsewhere. What does not concern us here is the nature of the courser, for whomsoever reaches that juncture in consciousness...'

It hurt his eyes to read more. He assumed it meant something, but it meant nothing to him. What was wrong with the customary year-old copy of *Country Life* or *Private Eye*? He flicked to another page. There was a second piece by the same fellow, EP Edwall, this one called 'Amar-Abtar, Lord of Castings'. It began: 'Origins of inference predicate a "gestation period" for the ripening of intuitive knowledge not dissimilar to the method used by the Bar-Aki in their pursuit of...'

On further inspection, Parnell determined that all the articles in the magazine had been written by EP Edwall with the exception of the last: 'EP Edwall' by F Beasley-Saint. It appeared to be a biographical piece, but not even that made a lot of sense. In fact, he must have drifted into a light sleep while trying to read it, because after scanning the first paragraph the next thing he knew he was rocking

back in his chair, swallowing air. The magazine lay open at his feet. The lamps on their stands were flickering, and there was a metallic, burning smell in the air. He checked his watch. Only a few minutes had passed.

He glanced at the closed door at the far end of the room. Still no sign of Dobson. This was a common method, of course. No one likes to wait, so see that they do. Everyone knew without being told. Make them wait. It was a silent, unconscious conspiracy, in which the public were more often than not complicit. He was sure it had been bred into them as a species. A child taken from its mother at birth and reared in isolation would still grow up knowing how to wait. Perhaps the instinct was fundamentally religious. To wait was to endure was to suffer. Parnell didn't like suffering. He considered the receptionist, still cranking her machine.

Then it occurred to him: had she even let Dobson know he was here? He didn't recall it. He stood and approached her. Leaning over the counter, he saw that the machine was not precisely as he had thought. The device that the woman cranked was no more than a crowning part, suspended in a rectangular gap in her work surface by cast-iron horizontal struts. The rising and falling hammers were levers, themselves connected to a series of downward-pointing metal rods, and as they rippled back and forth across the frame Parnell saw that they were causing motion below. The woman was not so much sitting on as attached to the rest of the machine. Her torso was held in a brace welded to an iron plate on the rear wall. Her left leg was free, yet her right, bent at the knee, was encased completely in an iron frame which moved up and down as the hammers rippled. He could not see, but by its motion Parnell assumed that this frame was also connected to something, a piston perhaps that disappeared below the level of the floor. The whole had an ungainly appearance. It seemed to Parnell an exercise in excessive ingenuity. He was surprised it didn't make more noise.

"I'm sorry," the receptionist said, at last registering his presence. She stopped cranking. Her leg stopped too. "Who was it you wanted to see?"

"Mr Dobson. I told you when I came in."

"Oh! I thought you were telling me that you *were* Mr Dobson. Funny coincidence, I thought, there being two Mr Dobsons like that. But it's not, is it? As it turns out. A coincidence."

"Or funny," he said.

"You want to see Mr Dobson? What was it about?"

"A counterfeit banknote."

"And what was the problem?"

"The bank is trying to rob me," said Parnell.

The woman didn't see the little ironic joke, unless the expression of her sense of humour extended to looking perplexed. Parnell inwardly conceded it might have more to do with the joke than the woman. But she pointed at the door in the far end of the room. "Through and down the stairs."

"And what was the problem, Mr Parnell?" Mr Dobson's large moon of a head swivelled jerkily in the iron neck brace, directing his face towards the floor.

Parnell pulled the offending note from his wallet. "This twenty pound bill is counterfeit," he said. "It came from your auto-teller. I demand restitution, compensation, repar-

ation, indemnification. Take your pick. I have no pressing engagements for the foreseeable future. Until March, in fact. Of next year. So you may pass me from drone to ghoul to corpse in endless circle, for all I care. I have plenty of time, and I will be satisfied."

"I see."

Et tu, Dobson?

This office too was hot and stuffy. All that was not beaten iron was crumbling brick, and all was covered in a fine soot, so that the entirety was black or lesser shades of grimy darkness — except the bare globe above that burned a tired yellow. From floor to ceiling, in the centre of the room, there stretched a dark metal pole, six inches in diameter, the purpose of which was not immediately apparent.

He must have been directly below the reception room, for Parnell saw that he had been right about the piston. It emerged through an aperture in the left-hand side of the ceiling and pumped into the body of a great spherical engine, which sat on a tripod the height of a man and emitted a constant low humming noise. This machine was the source of the soot: a copper exhaust pipe protruded from the upper hemisphere, and every minute or so a puff of black dust would explode gently into the air.

Mr Dobson himself was attached to this sphere by means of a large iron arm, its elbow bent up, the hand of which was a cage into which he fitted most snugly. He was suspended in the air so that Parnell had to crane upwards to see him. His body had been surgically truncated at the torso and left shoulder, from which points a myriad of fine cables snaked out and down, across the floor, thence into sockets at different heights in the walls. Above these points were legends that read varyingly, GOVERNANCE, EXECUTION, FORMALITY, DECISION, ALLOCATION, and so forth, there being many more, perhaps a hundred, words that sparked in Parnell's mind no association of pleasure.

Alone of what remained of his body, Dobson's large round head and right arm were without the mesh of the cage. He was free to use his hand to manipulate a panel of levers at the base of the container where his right hip had once been. He did so now in fact, pulling on a handle, and the great iron arm swung him down to Parnell's level.

It was difficult for Parnell to take account of any human characteristics he might have possessed. Indeed, he appeared to have few. His movements were smooth, but mirrored the mechanical nature of his attachments. His hair was oily and dark — whether this was due solely to the soot Parnell could not say — and his skin pallid and moist beneath the film of accumulated black dust. His face was so devoid of expression that it might have been a mask. Still, he wore what might have once been a white shirt — without the left arm — and a narrow grey tie.

He took the bill from Parnell's grip and raised it to his eyes. "This note is counterfeit," he said in a voice both flat and uninterested. "And you say that it came from your account?"

What novel frustration did this foretell? Parnell wondered. What mastery of deflection and evasion was he witnessing?

"I wonder," Dobson continued, droning on now like a tired recording, "if I were to check your account, whether or not I would find that *all* your funds were counterfeit."

"Perhaps so," said Parnell acidly, "if I were to withdraw them from your auto-teller."

"And if so, Mr Parnell, I wonder also, would that constitute fraud? Now. Sir." He handed back the note. "Was there a problem?"

Surely this could not be taught, this level of tap-dancing. Parnell was too impressed to be affronted. He had been dismissed, insulted and counter-accused in one breath. Masterful. He clapped his hands slowly. "Bravo, Mr Dobson," he said. "Bravo."

Dobson did not react, but the innards of the great spherical engine to which he was attached coughed loudly, and a particularly large puff of soot spluttered from the copper pipe and drifted slowly to the ground. Parnell watched as it settled, and saw for the first time that the floor itself was made of iron. Not one sheet, but two, joined down the middle. He realised now that the heat was rising from underfoot.

Parnell looked back at Dobson. The waxlike hand hovered over the control panel on the cage. It was a dare.

Fair enough, thought Parnell. *And fuck you.* "I'd like to see the manager."

"Certainly, Mr Parnell," said Dobson.

Before the request could be retracted, Dobson's hand worked furiously over the panel, turning the small handles, pulling and pushing levers in a predetermined sequence. It must have taken only a second, but it seemed much longer; when he was done, he tweaked a last handle, and the iron arm swung him back into the air.

There was a moment's silence, in which he almost relaxed, but then Parnell heard a murmurous sigh from below, a distant wakening that seemed to find answer throughout the entire building. There came next the grind of a massive gear, the sound of it muffled by deep stone, and the iron plates beneath Parnell's feet began to drag apart, sliding uniformly into cavities in the walls. He looked down.

At first there was no means by which to gauge the depth of the black pit that yawned beneath him, yet as the floor split ever wider, he saw the top of the staircase that spiralled down, well delineated at first, but fading eventually into no more than the hint of a grey line, then disappearing altogether into the blackness. Five hundred, a thousand feet? So that was the purpose of the central pole: the very top of the staircase railing was attached to its base.

He walked off the disappearing floor and onto the top step, grabbing the pole for support. The whole construction was sturdy. There was no danger that he would fall. He could see more clearly now, or rather, see more clearly that he was looking down into nothing. The pit had no sides that he could detect, and there was nothing in it, only the uprushing of uncomfortable heat. Dobson hung now more or less directly over him.

"It's not the principle," said Parnell. "It's the money. Surely you understand that."

"Understand? Understand?" said Dobson. "You are the one who understands now, I think."

By crikey, it approximates to a sense of humour, thought Parnell. But he looked down again, curiously, and in the next instant knew it was no joke, for there, a thousand feet below, as wide as a mile and as deep, a great fiery eye opened and peered back up at him.

"Through," said Mr Dobson, "and down the stairs."

Antony Mann is an Australian writer who lives in Oxford with his wife Judy, a cat and two axolotls. He can now juggle five balls.



In *A Brief History of Time* Steven Hawking points out that modern philosophers have become increasingly handicapped by exponentially advancing technology and mathematics in science, rendering them ill-equipped to grasp what is going on at the cutting edge of discovery. The same is true for modern novelists. The new physics, in particular the way it remoulds our ideas of space and time, has become a fashionable subject of 'serious literature' lately; but the lack of deep technical understanding of the precepts involved among novelists has produced a clutch of somewhat mixed results.

The most famous example is Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, which borrows the famous passage from Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* — where Billy Pilgrim experiences a war film in reverse time, with reverse causality — and recounts the entire life of a Nazi concentration camp doctor in similar reverse. What emerges is a rather pointless fairy story which advances our understanding of the quantum mechanics behind reverse time not at all. But in another way it is very instructive, for it shows us two things: firstly that the great literary skills that Amis possesses are no substitute for a good maths degree; and secondly that when a writer attempts to grapple with such material he is led inevitably along the path of sf plagiarism.

So what novelist has emerged who seems ideally equipped to deal with what cutting edge science means — and will mean — to us? It is the Australian hard sf writer Greg Egan. Here is a writer with strong literary qualities — a superb prose style, gigantic imaginative scope and a commitment to high seriousness — who has chosen sf as a vehicle in much the way that Marquez chose magic realism or Pynchon chose metafiction. More than anybody today Egan is living up to JG Ballard's daring statement from the introduction to *Crash*: 'I firmly believe that science fiction, far from being an unimportant minor offshoot, in fact represents the main literary tradition of the 20th century...'

Greg Egan was born in Perth in 1961. He majored in mathematics at the University of Western Australia, and after a brief failed attempt at becoming a film maker he settled down to writing and day jobbing as a computer programmer in medical research. A piece of juvenilia, *An Unusual Angle* — a surreal novel exploring his obsession with film making — was published by the Norstrilia Press in 1983; but it wasn't until the beginning of the 90s that his distinctive sf short stories, appearing mainly in *Interzone* and *Asimov's*, established his reputation.

He can be seen in a certain tradition, coming from the altered states and metaphysical questing of Philip K Dick, through to the dirty future-realism and techno-fetishism of Gibson and the cyberpunks. But Egan has gone beyond cyberpunk, exploiting difficult science and that fascinating region where it spills over into mysticism, and fusing it with his own most painterly take on the surreal and the fantastic to create a space that is uniquely his — where real philosophy is played out as future-world theatre.

His usual method is to take some arcane scientific concept and encapsulate it in an adroit storytelling framework, thereby illuminating it and making its nuances more accessible to the non-expert. A lot of Egan's magic lies in the plausibility of his rationales; he is an artist at surmounting the suspension of disbelief barrier that tends to handicap science fiction as a literary form. Often he operates on the cusp between science fact and fiction, and it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. But it is the metaphysical that really interests him, and his narratives soon become explorations of how the sense of self and the need for belief and meaning is affected by the transformations that science affords.

Let's look at some early short stories.

In 'The Hundred-Light-Year Diary' most everyone knows something of the future because they write a diary which is then transmitted and bounced back from a reverse-time galaxy, arriving a hundred years in the 'past'; therefore in the present what they wrote in the 'future' is there available, waiting to be read. Everyone's life is transformed by the palliative of foreknowledge, but can contentment really be that simple...?

In 'Axiomatic' a guy bent on avenging his wife's murder uses a neurological implant to bypass his conscience and so render the job of killing the murderer easier. But the implant has an unexpected side-effect, and through it the whole philosophy of loss, pain and revenge is beautifully examined in a way impossible in a naturalistic story.



BEYOND CYBERPUNK

Greg Egan profiled by Roger Keen

In 'Learning to Be Me' — a key story which became the basis for much later work — it is routine for people to have their entire brain functions copied onto an indestructible crystal which then — should they choose to 'switch' — takes over from the brain and gives effective immortality. By making the story revolve around the narrator's dilemma over 'switching' — he fears that if he does so then his 'real self' will be lost — it becomes a deep and wonderful treatise on the concept of identity.

These stories were all published in *Interzone*, and marked British readers' first exposure to Egan, winning him an agent and a publisher in the process. They have since been collected along with fifteen others to form *Axiomatic*. At around the same time Egan was working on a novel — actually his seventh after *An Unusual Angle* — which would become his first published sf extended work. This is *Quarantine*, and by any standards it is uncompromisingly hard and difficult sf.

Quarantine is a mathematician's novel if ever there was one — an exploration of the aesthetics of mathematical theory as if it could be applied to the world in a concrete way. It is built upon the tenets of quantum mechanics: the uncertainty principle and the paradox of Schrodinger's Cat, the central problem of the act of measurement altering the results observed, and most tellingly the 'many worlds' ideas proposed by Hugh Everett III, which postulate that the universe is constantly splitting and branching into innumerable parallel versions of itself to account for every possible outcome in the act of observation.

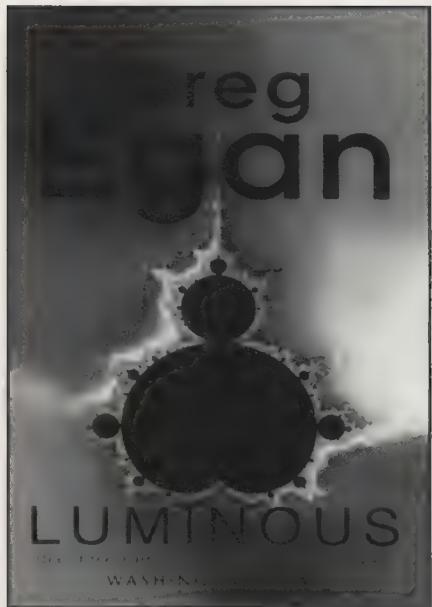
The dazzling and very cyberpunk short story 'The Infinite Assassin' is a take on the 'many worlds' theory. In that piece a drug causes the user to create a vortex of shuffling alternate realities around her; in *Quarantine* the same idea is used more subtly and elaborately. It starts with a private detective on a missing person case. Though brain damaged, this girl was able to escape several times from a high security hospital without leaving any signs of how it was done; now kidnappers have taken her to find out how and harness the ability for their grandiose ends.

In a convoluted tale we travel to the heart of this quantum mystery, and find that the secret lies in manipulating the infinite choice that the 'many worlds' model gives — choose a set of states that make snake eyes come up on dice as many times as you like, or the one-in-a-quintillion possibility that a security system fails in sync with your penetration of it. The state of being 'smeared' — existing simultaneously in every alternate state — is seen as an ultimate mystical goal, or again as the harbinger of disaster; and as the process gets out of control we head for a pyrotechnic Daliesque climax.

What *Quarantine* is doing is providing a plausible rationalistic basis for what are, virtually, magical powers — which in the run-of-the-mill genre novel would be put down to 'paranormal forces'. Having set out such a rationale it then pursues the rarified logic and its ramifications to highly organised but increasingly surreal conclusions. *A thriller based on quantum mechanics?* Yes, indeed. It is heavy intellectual fiction which demands work from the reader, but rewards him with an experience quite unlike any other.

If *Quarantine* is a mathematician's novel then *Permutation City*, Egan's next one, is a computer programmer's novel. The book is a protracted love affair with software, with the possibilities of software taken to ultimate extremes. It builds upon the ideas in 'Learning to Be Me' and other stories, and carries the thread forward to be picked up by later works such as the story 'Transition Dreams' and

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LUMINOUS

Greg Egan

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Greg Egan is one of science fiction's brightest stars. *Luminous* is his second collection of short fiction and contains stories not previously published in book form.

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the novel *Diaspora*. In classic science fiction there is the nightmare that human beings will be taken over by robots and computers; in this strand of Egan's fiction humans *actually transmogrify* into robots and computers — or is it vice versa?

Paul Durham wakes up one morning knowing he has done something terrible, so terrible he can barely believe his stupidity. He's made a software copy of his whole brain, synapse by synapse, which is capable of 'living' within a virtual reality environment. At the core of his angst is the fact that he himself is not the original Durham: he is the copy.

By 2045 such brain copying has superseded cryogenics as the most feasible route to immortality; though it's a dubious kind of immortality as the copy isn't 'you' at all, more a clone. The process is highly expensive, both in terms of initial outlay and in terms of the vast computing power needed to 'run' the copies and their environments, ie maintaining 'virtual life'. Economic and political vicissitudes could therefore pose a threat. Durham's dream is to create an entire hermetically sealed virtual world — Permutation City — free from such adverse influences, populate it with copies who can afford the joining fee, and then everyone will live happily for ever and ever...

The work has a terrific feeling of prescience as regards what future VR technology could undoubtedly be like — VR conferencing, role playing, puppetry; the creation of alternative 'VR selves'. There is another complex strand dealing with the replication of life within a computer model — the 'Autoverse' — from the atomic level upwards, through DNA to simple computer bacteria which possess evolutionary autonomy. Once Permutation City is up and running all these elements are taken to the wildest, furthest shores of speculation, postulating a complete alternative universe of computing.

Ultimately though the book is about the nature of the self and the implications of immortality — just as in 'Learning to Be Me'. And computer immortality turns out to be curiously prosaic and humdrum. One copy character spends a decade or two making 160,000 table legs, while another constantly relives the scene of a murder he committed while young. But immortality, it seems, is unstable, and as the City comes apart at the seams the protagonists finally have to grapple with the big questions about life, death and self-transformation.

In addition to exploring the nature of future science, Egan is constantly speculating about how it will impinge upon the cultural and social levels. Generally his characters have a well developed science-awareness, and their deepest beliefs are often related to scientific information and disinformation. His work abounds with scientifically motivated quasireligious cults, extrapolations of today's animal activists, eco-warriors and groups opposed to food additives, genetic engineering, etc. In his third sf novel *Distress* various cults line up for an extraordinary battle over the nature of truth and reality as expressed by the Theory of Everything, or TOE, seen as a kind of scientific *satori* in providing a unifying description of the universe from the cosmic scale down to the subatomic.

The regular anti-TOE cults Mystical Renaissance and Humble Science! [sic] oppose TOE formulation as they think once *everything* is explained the world will be robbed of its magical and transcendent dimensions; but for the fractious and more mysterious Anthrocospologists there are bigger things at stake, and they are prepared to commit violence and murder to achieve their ends. Again Egan uses the thriller form in a tale of espionage, counter espionage and treachery, with goons and assassins coming out of the woodwork by the dozen. *Distress* is a strange brew of a novel — imagine *A Brief History of Time* and *The Tao of Physics* rewritten by John LeCarre!

At heart it is an updated staging of the old territorial battle between science and religion, but as one would expect Egan takes it further, into some genuinely weird realms. The Anthrocospologists, as the name suggests, put humans and human consciousness at the centre of things, and so arises the concept of 'mixing with information', where physics and ideas melt together and emerge reborn, the implications of which relate to TOE formulation as well as the inexplicable disease Distress, which turns its victims firstly into screaming maniacs and then gabbling Steven Hawkings-on-acid. Among many narrative prestidigitations Egan actually uses quantum reverse time decay as part of the cause and effect structure of the story — perhaps Martin Amis should take note.

Like *Quarantine* and the excellent long story 'Luminous' here is a novel built upon theoretical mathematics, an unlikely area indeed, but it works very well.

See also page 50 for a similar offer on Joyce Carol Oates's *Man Crazy*.

The plotting is as tricksy as in the best of thrillers and there is real excitement and suspense as we wait for the consequences of the TOE to unfold, knowing that backed up by Egan's rarified imagination it will be a thing of marvels.

Transformations of one kind or another play a major part in all Egan's work. In *Quarantine* and several stories neural implants condition consciousness and provide internal computing facilities. In *Distress* mega-rich biotech guru Ned Landers has altered the basics of his DNA to make it different to any other living creature's, granting him total viral immunity. And in that same work asex character Akili has undergone surgery to physically and neurally excise gender and sexuality from the human equation. This is the next stage of evolution as Egan sees it: man using technology to refine himself rather than waiting for nature to take a hand.

Diaspora, Egan's next novel and the latest to date, pushes the frontiers of transformation into the distant future, a thousand years hence. By this time humanity has divided up into three distinct modes, often at odds with one another, jealous and suspicious by turns. Corporeal humans are known as fleshers, and live in smaller communities than the present, having eschewed exponential growth. Some of them — the exuberants — have undergone genetic modifications to give them such things as avian, amphibian or photosynthetic characteristics. But on the whole fleshers seem the most retarded of the life modes in this brave new world; the future lies with the Gleisner robots and the citizens of the polises.

We first meet the Gleisner robot in 'Transition Dreams', a neat little horror story about the perils of ontological transfer between flesh and machine states. It is based on the *Permutation City* principles of replicating the brain as software and running the copy in a virtual environment, only the Gleisner robot is fully interactive with the outside world. So in the Gleisner robot we have the complete all singing all dancing artificial 'human' — immortal, of course. By the turn of the next millennium they have become a race apart, known simply as 'gleisners', and despised by the fleshers. Due to the split they have left earth altogether and live in space.

And the copies of *Permutation City* themselves have gone from strength to strength, now inhabiting a huge network of interlinked 'polises' — hardware run virtual worlds, but with access to the outside through cameras and probes — spread out across the solar system and beyond. The polis citizens too have left their flesh roots behind and become self-replicating, new life being grown from 'mind seeds' — digital genomes which can be programmed at will. *Diaspora*'s main character, Yatima, is polis born and bred; and like Akili in *Distress* is asexual.

A gamma ray burst from colliding binary neutron stars causes the mother of all electric storms on Earth and threatens to leave the planet unable to support life. The polises, buried underground, are unaffected; but the experience urges the citizens to explore outwards and form the Diaspora, sending a thousand copies of themselves into space to see what they can find. Eventually they stumble across alien life — but it's nothing like ET, more a kind of alien 'virtual reality', ironically mirroring their own polises, stemming from the random computing power of giant polysaccharide molecules in a thousand dimensions.

But the real prize is wormhole travel to other universes, achieved by means of some really tortuous physics, opening up a cosmos of many universes — modular universes, joined by singularities, each with its individual space-time spawned from meltdown and Big Bang. Some are five dimensional, and Egan's description of perceiving and interacting in five-space stretches the senses enough; but it's nothing compared to the mind-boggling multi universe ascent in search of the Transmuters, the super advanced civilization who first pointed the way out of this universe.

Diaspora brilliantly rekindles those dizzying sensations of awe at the vastness and emptiness of the cosmic 'out there'. On the biggest scale imaginable this time, Egan asks the questions: *How far can you go?* and: *What does it mean when you reach the final destination?* Whether as a speculative account of future space exploration, or as a metaphor for mystical search or mind-expansion, *Diaspora* is devastatingly clever stuff.

Alongside the novels Egan has continued to pen marvellous short stories, their scope deepening to encompass greater complexity and maturity of outlook. In many ways the story form shows off his talent in its absolute best light, since here an idea can be expressed concisely and perhaps more eloquently, and can travel lighter when it comes to the baggage of info-dumping.



Egan has gained a reputation for being something of a recluse. He tends to stay put in his home town of Perth, and prefers to deal with business in the West at a remove — an attitude rather mirrored in his work, replete with its elaborate metaphors for distancing, for seeking out the hermetic way of life. No photograph of him will appear with this profile because none has ever been published.

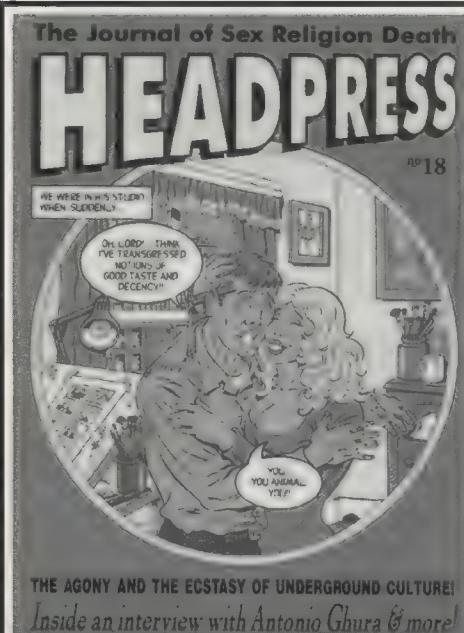
Over the last few years he has concentrated more on the longer story, like 'Mitochondrial Eve' where the battle of the sexes is fought out in the field of evolutionary gene transmission; and 'Luminous' where an alternative system of mathematics threatens to unravel reality as we know it; and the heart-rending 'Reasons to be Cheerful' where a man struggles to pick up the pieces after an illness leaves him completely unable to experience positive and pleasurable sensation. These and other later stories appear in the recently published new collection *Luminous*.

Certainly Egan is, and probably will always remain, 'hard sf'; but by having a metaphorical as well as a literal dimension to his works and by placing essentially human elements centre stage, he shares much with literary, mainstream, and indeed slipstream and more experimental writing. He is that rare thing: both a scrupulously diligent academic researcher, prepared to look hard at everything that is happening in cutting edge science; and at the same time a wild outrageous fantasist, prepared to fly as far and as fast as the wings of his imagination will carry him. It is the fusion of these two essentially disparate characteristics that makes him such an extraordinary writer: one gains more insight into what arcane science is *really* about from reading Egan than from a score of non-fiction 'popular science' books.

As for the man himself, Egan has gained a reputation for being something of a recluse. He tends to stay put in his home town of Perth, and prefers to deal with business in the West at a remove — an attitude rather mirrored in his work, replete with its elaborate metaphors for distancing, for seeking out the hermetic way of life. No photograph of him will appear with this profile because none has ever been published. In 1993 he gave an in-depth interview to the Australian small press magazine *Eidolon* (reprinted in *Interzone* #73), in which he comes across as level-headed and reasonable, and not as some obsessively private JD Salinger type. He simply has no interest in playing the publicity game, or in becoming a visible 'personality', preferring instead to let the writing speak for itself. And it certainly does, for if there is a genius in the current speculative fiction scene then it is Greg Egan.

Bibliography

1983	An Unusual Angle
1992	Quarantine
1994	Permutation City
1995	Distress
	Axiomatic (short stories)
1997	Diaspora
1998	Luminous (short stories)



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Welcome to a new regular
TTA column which is intended to provoke some debate and initiate some disputes regarding whatever topical or timeless issue I alight upon. Responses to 'An Insular Concern' and 'The Thin Man's Guide to Late 90s Literature' were rather thin on the ground so, this time, write in and agree with me. Better still, disagree and shoot me down with firmer facts and a more coherent argument. Respond *please*. As Bob Calvert said, 'Is there any life out there?'

As for the title, the poor old flightless bird was finally hunted into extinction some 300 years ago but its spirit lives on. Not all changes and initiatives are beneficial and the progress of the new should often be treated with extreme caution, if not an outright turf-grabbing dragging of heels. To paraphrase The Beatles, 'I am the dodo'. Yep. And you all thought I was such a trendy, post-modern, experimental Slipstreamer!

Right, to business: did you subscribe? Did you sign up like a shot on October 1st for the latest must-have/don't-need slab of designer technology? Yes, I'm on about digital TV, the apparent 'revolution in your home'. The only revolution in my home would be if I installed flock wallpaper or washed up more than once a day, but never mind. The onset of D.T.V. has been preceded by the usual bombardment of BBC public information broadcasts and more blatant adverts in magazines, on billboards and over on the commercial channels. Let's have a closer look at some of the static advertising. There's the one from Sky which says, 'I can give you up to five different movies every hour'. Well, excuse me for being stupid but I thought I could pop down to Blockbusters and choose from a somewhat wider range than that. Besides which, aren't most films on average about a hundred minutes in length? So, do I watch the first ten minutes then flip over to another? Is that how Barry Norman and



Allen
Ashley

Five channels,
thirty-five
channels, one
million and five
highly specialised
channels – who
gives a shit? Just
how many
dolphin
documentaries
or Jerry Springer
fifteen-round
slugging matches
do you need to
watch anyhow?

Alexander Walker manage to keep up with the plethora of current releases? Or is this just another example of our decadent society with its dumbed down, can't settle to anything sustained, goldfish attention span culture?

Personally, I don't manage to watch five movies a *month* but I suppose that being in steady employment I'm one of the target consumers for this wonderful revolution in entertainment. Honestly, I don't have the energy, let alone the inclination, to watch any more television than I do currently. Half the time I'm not even paying attention, it's just that the girlfriend's got it on. Short of premature retirement on grounds of exacerbated angst, or, fingers crossed, a serious lottery win, I'm not going to have those unused leisure hours in the conceivable future either. Five channels, thirty-five channels, one million and five highly specialised channels – who gives a shit? Just how many dolphin documentaries or Jerry Springer fifteen-round slugging matches do you need to watch anyhow?

How about that slogan, 'Let me give you control'? Is it dyslexia or natural English cynicism that makes me read this as, 'Let me control you'?

Science fiction is *not* prediction but as we stand on the edge of the third millennium it seems clear that many of the propositions serving as a subtext to the pulp fiction of Golden Age SF *will* actually come to pass. In many ways, we're already living in the fixture. Every piece of information technology today serves more than its original function: calculators are also watches, telephones pick up cable TV and radio, etc. The prospect for television is not television as such; instead, every piece of the technological jigsaw is very soon due to merge into an all-encompassing artificial intelligence within every home. This is not necessarily a desirable outcome. Excuse my typical British pessimism but access is rarely a one way street and

most knowledge comes at a price. Technology supposedly *liberates* us and yet history shows that farm labourers worked fewer hours before the Industrial Revolution, and even in this humble article my point is proven by the fact that I will spend time moving sentences and rearranging paragraphs on screen when at a typewriter or with a quill pen I'd have to make my mind up on the spot.

That *HAL 9000* or *Frankenstein's Computer* is just around the corner is confirmed by an extremely clever but nonetheless disturbing billboard advert from Sky Digital. The scene shows kiddie toys scattered all round – the usual stuff: balls, teddy bears, dolls, whatever – whilst the television in the corner has an illuminated screen proclaiming the message, 'Interact with me'. Oh my God, this one *really* plays on parental worries and obsessions that children don't play properly any more and just want to watch the fucking box like a bunch of brain dead zombies. I suspect it's trying to be ironic and post-modern in some way but it's actually scarier than a psycho and makes you want to yell at the kids to go out and play with a ball or a skipping rope or learn how to play Ludo or dominoes or get their friend to come round and indulge in that make believe role playing which is an absolute staple of healthy infancy...please, anything rather than sit in front of a bloody screen all your young days, even if it does have cute cartoon characters who answer you back with a set of two hundred programmed responses.

Yes, I know I'm sounding off like the ranting grandson of Ray Bradbury but I don't care. TV is just a tool among many, that's all. Stop letting it attempt to rule your life. Resist its imperious persuasiveness. You have control already. It's called an off switch...or better still, a plug pulled out of the wall socket.

Ned Ludd knew my father; father knew Ned Ludd.



riverrun

PAUL LEONARD

When Maria went down to him in the morning, José was dead.

In the deckhouse I heard her screams and I knew what they meant. But I kept my hands on the wheel and my eyes on the wrinkled brown skin of the river ahead. I had no choice: it was my watch. There might be mud banks under the water, floating logs, or whole trees upended and caught on the bottom. Even this many miles down the river, where the shore was so far away that it could not be seen on either side, the current was still fast. So I kept steering while Maria screamed, though I knew that it was all for nothing now, that without José to dream for us we could all drown and it would make no difference.

I felt Juan's heavy young body running across the top deck and down the port ladder. The cabin door opened and slammed, the fancy glass rattling. Checking ahead I saw nothing so I locked the wheel, ran down to the anchor, unhitched it and threw it over. Almost all the rope was used before it hit the bottom. I waited whilst it bumped and dragged, glancing ahead. Cleated it when it caught at last. Then went back to the deckhouse and watched while the boat swung slowly round; now side on to the current, rolling and creaking; now stopped, rocking gently, with the bow upriver.

Then I went down to the cabin.

He was dead. There was no doubt about it this time. The flesh of his cheeks was cold and white like the belly of a fish, and his eyes, monstrously, were open, pale blue irises bulging outwards as if at the last breath something had tried and failed to escape.

All three of the children were there. Juan was standing on the low stool, his hands shaking a little as he lit the candles in the niche above the bed. Xavier, the selfish one, was leaning on the half-open door to the lower cabins, his steep self-absorbed face a mixture of worry and incomprehension. Maria, the youngest, who had never known any world but the boat in her fourteen years, was kneeling at the foot of the bed with tears running down her face and her arms pressed tight against her sides.

"We should've watched him in the night," she said. "We should've."

"He was dying," said Xavier. "He would have died anyway, whether or not we stayed up to watch the show."

There was a brief, horrible, silence.

"I didn't intend to be disrespectful," Xavier muttered, red-faced, looking at the corners of the cabin one after the other in that way he has. "I'm just stating the facts."

Juan stared, holding out the burning taper towards his brother as if it were a weapon.

Maria's eyes, pale blue like her father's, were switching from Juan to Xavier and back again, as regular as the ticking of a clock. I put a hand onto her head and caressed her strange pale hair.

I looked pleadingly at Juan. He nodded. "I'll get the flag."

We'd agreed it months ago, Juan and Xavier and I. Wrap him in the flag and put him over the side of the boat. Let the river take him.

It wasn't difficult to do. The body was already swaddled in sheets. Juan and I lifted it up and Xavier spread the flag out underneath: the old, untruthful

orange and green, faded by the years in the river sun. I wrapped and tucked the coarse soft fabric as easily and emptily as if it were a Michaelmas cake I were making. I felt no emotion, not even revulsion. The rigid limbs through the layers of cloth were empty like a wax casket; or (as Xavier would put it) an accretion of chemicals. My husband, José — his body that I had known for thirty years, the body that had moved, spoken, laughed, grunted — that body no longer existed. This was just a body. Garbage for disposal.

"Stones," said Xavier's voice, lurking in the half-darkness. "We need stones. Otherwise he'll float."

"We haven't got any stones," said Juan. "So forget it."

"We could go ashore and get some."

Juan's muscles under the threadbare shirt and denims aligned themselves for battle. "Ashore? You talk about going ashore at a time like this? Mother? Do you hear him?"

"I hear him," I said.

Xavier cowered towards the door. "I... I..."

I imagined José's body, perhaps half-unravelled from the flag, coming back to us and knocking against the side of the boat amongst the familiar suds and fragments of branches: bloated, wriggling with fish and wormy corruption. Until that moment I suppose I'd seen José drifting on ahead, shining a little, the first of us to reach the sea; but this new image of Xavier's replaced my old one. It wasn't Xavier's fault I know. He was 'just stating the facts'. But I blamed him for it anyway.

"Juan," I said. "We do need something. So that he'll sink."

Juan's face creased under the eyes and around the mouth. "We can't go ashore, mother. We can't. Not now. Father — "

"I know what father wanted," I said quickly. I didn't want to hear Juan's version of it. He always succeeded in making José's dream ridiculous. A toy project, a plastic farm: all set out in perfect order, with a mapped destination and a guaranteed profit. This idyllic belief was almost more painful to me than Xavier's criticisms.

"Batteries," said Xavier from the doorway. "We could use the batteries if you don't want to go ashore."

Juan glanced at him. "We'll never get them out."

"We need the weight, Juan," I said as gently as I could. "And the batteries are no use any more."

So we went to the old forward hatch. Juan prised it open with a crowbar and lifted the four corroded cubes of metal up and onto the deck. Then we slipped them into the folds of the flag and bundled the now-ungainly parcel over the rail. As it fell, something — the corner of a battery, probably — caught the ball of my thumb. I swore and held the bruised hand against my stomach. I looked out across the brown river water to the white horizon — and suddenly realised José was gone.

"We ought to have done some words," said Juan.

"You reckon?" said Maria. She was standing on the topdeck, her gold hair roped forward across her shoulders. Her tick-tock eyes were swinging from Juan to me and back again.

"They used to say words," insisted Juan. "Didn't they, mother? At the camp?"

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter." I didn't see what words had to do with it. He was gone, that was all.

Then suddenly I was weeping and it was Juan who comforted me, rolling me into his big arms, and Maria who came to touch both of us and say, "It'll be all right, Mamma. We'll carry on."

But Xavier remained hunched and silent at the rail, his eyes turned to the horizon.

The anchor had snagged and the rope broke when Juan tried to raise it. When the broken end came up he stared at the dripping mass of black fibres, as if he could somehow make the anchor materialise in their place by the power of his disbelief.

"Perished," said Xavier, reaching out and feeling it. "The cable should have been put in the hold when we weren't using it, not left out in the weather. I've told you before."

"You shut up," said Juan. "If you'd *helped*, it might have been different."

"Now, now, boys," said Maria, leaning forward from the topdeck rail and pouting at them.

"Maria," I ordered, "go and steer." Unanchored, the boat was already turning in the water.

"I'll do it," said Xavier, moving away from the rail.

Juan glowered at him. His fists were clenched. "You'll steer us ashore, most likely."

"Juan!" I said. Then quickly, trying to look at both of them: "We'll have to have four watches again. I'll do the sunset watch. Juan, you'll have midnight. Maria can stay with dawn, she's used to that, and Xavier, the afternoon watch." That one was José's, I thought. The easiest for his old eyes. The boys nodded but they were still staring at each other. Xavier backed off, in slow-motion steps, like a cat avoiding a fight.

The deckhouse door clicked open and Maria's head appeared. "Mamma, I can't hold the wheel!" she screamed.

I heard Xavier's voice: "She's panicking, the boat will go round of its own accord." But Juan was already half-way up the ladder and I was there behind him. The boat canted strangely as the current caught her sideways and I almost fell. My bruised hand ached as I clamped it onto the top rung to steady myself.

In the deckhouse Juan was fighting the current, grimly holding the boat at right angles to it. The old wood groaned.

I took the wheel from him. "You'll break the rudder cable next." I tried to force a lightness I didn't feel into my voice.

Juan only clenched his big fists tighter. "I'm only trying to help you. To fucking help, that's all."

"Tut, tut, Juanito! Language!" said Maria. But her eyes were on the river ahead. She touched my arm. "It's okay mamma, I can manage now."

She had to prise my hands away from the wheel. My arms were rigid, vibrating as if there were a motor in them. I could see the bright dial of José's compass above the wheel but it seemed strangely distant, as if layer after layer of glass were descending between me and it. I tried to move my eyes and found that I couldn't. I was conscious of Xavier's voice again, somewhere a long way off: "Are you all right? Mother?"

And my own pleading voice locked inside me: *Not now, please, God, not now. Not before we reach the sea.*

"WE HAVE TO GO ASHORE, MOTHER." XAVIER IS PACING UP AND DOWN the floor of my cabin. His steps cause one of the boards to creak repeatedly, regularly, like an old wall clock that needs oiling. "For your sake. We have to do it."

"Why for my sake?"

He stops walking for a moment. A hiccup in the mechanism. He shrugs. "Your health."

"Xavier, I'm perfectly well. I've had a mild stroke, that's all. Maybe not even that. I'll be able to take my watch again in a few days."

"And then?"

"We'll reach the sea soon."

"And what then?"

"I don't know, Xavier. I don't know. Your father knew these things. I just...don't any more." I'm beginning to cry, which is no good. He'll think it's emotional blackmail.

Bite your lip. Bite it hard, till the blood comes.

"Mother." He's still walking up and down with his hands behind his back, his fingers flicking about excitedly. If only he'd do something *comforting* for God's sake. Crouch down by me or put a hand on my forehead. But no. All he does is talk. "Have you ever thought about what will happen when we do reach the sea? The boat hasn't been sailed in years — only steered. We've hardly any fuel and I don't expect the engine works anyway. The hull's half rotten. We'll sink in the first storm — if we don't die of thirst first, because there'll be no fresh water. It doesn't make any sense, any of it. It never did."

A pause.

"We used to go ashore. When I was a kid. Pick fruit from the trees on the slopes. I can remember — "

"Those were provisioning trips. And it was years ago. The shore was closer then."

"Well, a provisioning trip, then."

"For God's sake stop marching up and down like that, Xavier. You're driving me mad."

He stops for a moment. "We could at least take a *look*."

"Xavier, we're not going on any sort of trip to the shore. It would take months, the river's so wide now. And the risks are terrible...the government — "

"Mother, do you really think Tejero's people operate this far down? We must have travelled across half of creation on this boat. Fourteen years, mother. Fourteen years."

Oh God yes, Xavier. I'm sorry, Xavier. Your childhood. Your youth. I know. And Maria's. All of Maria's life. Most of Juan's. You think I don't see what José and I have stolen from you? I know how it must be for you to be trapped here, with every movement echoing amongst the old wood and every hour planned in service of the voyage — no wonder you have no faith in the destination! And my own childhood, so different: the wild girl on the lemon sands, the cliffs the colour of a brimstone's wing, big and sharp against the blue sky, and the waves rolling in striped with foam. Oh yes it was frightening, that strong cold water around your feet, but I laughed, I laughed all the time like the monkey in the song, because I had the power to judge and leap, to cheat the waves of their gravity.

But that was before the War, before José, before Tejero, before everything.

Aloud I say, "When we reach the sea, Xavier, you'll understand. When we reach the sea."

"WHAT'S THAT?" JUAN'S HEAVY BACK ECLIPSES THE RIVER AS HE steers. His face looks round over his shoulder like a pale gibbous moon in the night. "What's that?" he repeats.

I hear it now. The scraping of plastic on wood.

Juan's hands are off the wheel. "I'm going to have a look."

I stand up quickly, feel my breath catch and my head buzz. "No. I'll go."

Juan remains standing, half turned away from the river, his face a mask. My arm bars his way. Slowly, he turns back to the river.

The plastic cover is off the rowboat by the time I get there. But I can't comprehend the figure in the white dress, frozen in the act of stepping in to the boat with the tied parcel in her hand.

"Mamma, I — "

"Maria!"

"Maria and I are going ashore, mother." Xavier is a shadow in the doorway.

"Maria," I repeat aimlessly.

"Mamma, he said there would be mountains." Maria's voice is breathy. "He pointed at those big clouds last night and he said that mountains were like that, grand and vast and covered in beautiful forests and we could eat all the fruit in the world — "

"But Maria — " I can see her eyes in the half-dark now. Her father's eyes. They are quite still and staring at the package in her hand. The tick-tock motion has stopped. I struggle for the words to break her dream. "Maria, the jungles...if there are any jungles...they're full of...nasty people...people with guns...and they'll do bad things to you..."

Her eyes switch up to mine like a trigger closing. She drops the package and runs around the boat into my arms. "Oh mamma, mamma, that's *exactly* what Xavier said! He said that" — she lowers her voice to a whisper — "Juan will do bad things to me. Or even that he will. If we all stay here. That we have to go ashore, to get away...to..."

"Sanity." Xavier has stepped out of the doorway and has one foot up on the gunwale of the rowboat. "Away from insanity. Are you coming, Maria?" He's taken out a knife and is sawing at the old dry ropes that hold the boat in place.

Maria shudders and clings to me. I can feel her wet tears on my arm. When the last rope parts Xavier speaks again. "Chuck us the net then, Maria."

Maria shakes her head and her nails dig into the back of my neck. Very gently I push her away. "Give him the net, Maria. We can spare the little one." It's bundled up and ready. I wonder when Xavier did it, why neither Juan nor I noticed.

Moving like a robot, Maria picks up the net and throws it into the boat. Then she turns back to me. "You're going to let him go?" she says, her face quivering with disbelief. "You're going to let him go and leave us?"

"I can't stop him."

"Juan could." She starts towards the deckhouse — then stops. "Oh." She sits down and hugs her knees.

There's a squeal of metal from the davits behind us. A huge thud of wood on wood.

Juan rushes out of the deckhouse door, looks down at Maria then up at me. "What the hell's going on? Mother?"

"Xavier's taking the rowboat. He's leaving."

He stops. His shoulders slacken. "Perhaps as well he does. He's no use." A pause. "Are you okay, Maria? He didn't hurt you?" He crouches down by her and reaches out, but she shrinks away from his hand and draws her legs up even tighter against her body. "Xavier? Did you touch her?" He's shouting now. "Did he touch you, Maria?"

Maria's voice is weak. "I'm all right, Juan, just leave me alone."

A bump and a splash behind. The scrape of an oar against wood. I can see the boat from the edge of my eye, a grey water-beetle making its way to the edge of a pond in the moonlight.

Suddenly Juan is at the rail. "You bastard!" he shouts. "You bastard, how can you go and leave us, we'll never get there now, you bastard...bastard..."

He breaks off into sobs. I haven't seen him cry like that since the first little model boat that he made sank in the river. Was he seven then? Eight? I walk up to him, reach out and touch his cheek. "More tears," I say, aware that my own eyes are wet. "If we go on like this we'll have cried enough to make a sea of our own."

I can still hear the sound of Xavier's oars, but even as I listen it's fading away, becoming one with the sounds of the river. I let Juan go and walk to the deckhouse, shutting the door behind me.

Juan steers by day and Maria by night. Or sometimes they steer together, one on each side of the wheel. I don't know why they do that. I've got too tired to worry about it since my second stroke. These days I can only lie on the foredeck watching. Maybe I'm starting to get old.

And the world is changing: it seems that the sky is hotter. There's always white cloud over it and there are flashes from horizon to horizon — airbursts, as if the War is being fought again. Perhaps it's being replayed by the old machines. Sometimes black trails of cloud reach down like many-jointed arms and grey ash falls on the river water. It trembles and thick mud boils to the surface. It's very dangerous then: Juan has to steer around it. But he's strong. So strong.

And Maria has come on well in the last year. She doesn't have to stitch and patch any more, she can get into some of the dresses I wore when I was younger. She looks very fetching with the fronts cut so low. When she comes to bring me water I always say to her, "When we reach the sea all the fishermen in their bright yellow oilskins will be courting you. They'll be fighting over you, I should think." She smiles at that and says yes mamma, and flicks her eye at Juan in the deckhouse as she lifts my head and pours the water gently into my open mouth.

I know that they don't believe me, that they don't think we're going anywhere any more. But they'll see the truth soon enough. There isn't far to go. I can see fingers of blue water on the bow horizon. I can hear the seagulls calling and I can smell the salt spray. I can almost feel it on my skin, cooling, stinging.

It's there, it's only just ahead of us, almost in touching distance now. Our dream, our destiny.

The sea. The sea. The sea.

Paul Leonard lives in Bristol and makes his living by writing *Doctor Who* novels and answering charity phone calls.



DEBBIE MOON, ABERYSTWYTH

'The Aspect' and 'The Doll Thief' were particularly outstanding, and 'A Bottleful of Shadows' was a terrifically cinematic story. But, as fine as the fiction always is, it's the quality of the non-fiction that really raises the magazine above most of its competitors. The Slipstream Cinema column is certainly one of the most intelligent and interest-provoking cinema columns I've ever seen. Still not sure about Rick Cadger and Wayne Edwards though. Maybe I'm missing the point, but they generally have the same effect on me as being stuck on a bus with some old codger rattling on about how terrible the world is (and how it was all so much better in his day...).

ALAN FRACKELTON, GREENFORD

I turned straight to the Steve Rasnic Tem story. I've been a big fan of his writing ever since reading the stories he did for one of the *Night Visions* collections, and I've always found him well worth reading. 'The Doll Thief' is a fine example: subtle and shocking, the kind of story you can't ignore. He barely hints at the fate of Flint's two daughters, but all the implications are there in his actions. Brilliant.

Breakdown, and people's attempts to try to cope with the brutality of life seemed to be a strong theme throughout the issue; next to the Tem story Conrad Williams and Jason Frowley did it best, but Christopher Priest's comment that speculative fiction should always be 'prepared to shock or outrage or confound' resonated strongly through all the fiction. As ever, I look forward to more.

ROSANNE RABINOWITZ, LONDON

The other day I visited the TTA website; quite impressive. I haven't entered my favourite TTA story, as it's impossible to narrow it down to *one*. I'd say that 'The Guinea Worm' [Julie Travis, TTA5], 'Deadhead' [Justina Robson, TTA11] and 'Dancing About Architecture' [Martin Simpson, TTA11] are all running a close tie, and I'm sure there are others that slip my mind at the moment that rank equally.

But what about the *worst* TTA story? Perhaps there should be a category for that too! Somehow I find that a lot easier to choose (I reckon that's a good thing).

In that case, I can easily say it'd be 'The Healing' by Clifford Thurlow [TTA13]. I actually meant to write in about that before, when it was more relevant to our early discussion about women writers and TTA. I think it could've easily put a lot of women writers off.

Technically the story is well constructed. Yes, it's got a strong narrative and some well-turned phrases and it's got hooks in all the right places to keep you reading, but the actual content is so appallingly misogynistic and nonsensical. It sorely lacks in terms of character and motivation. I had no sense at all of what the couple were trying to salvage on the trip to Greece. I just wanted to say to them, 'Why don't you ditch each other and shut up?'

Worse, I felt the story was rather transparently and manipulatively set up to make the reader feel that the woman *deserved* getting raped (prettied up with candles in a circle) while the grizzled, horny-handed peasants get a look in. Is getting to rape his wife who won't put out for him the 'healing' of the title? OK, she's stupid and obnoxious but *no one* should be raped however irritating they may be. The bit about the guy getting hairy doesn't add anything or make much sense. Or is it that he's getting close to his 'animal nature'...me Tarzan you Jane, ugga ugga!

TTA's website *Shadowlink*, edited by Lawrence Dyer, is updated monthly with the latest news and offers from TTA Press, and includes the magazines *Crimewave* and *Zene* as well as *The Third Alternative*. You'll find complete stories and story extracts, interviews with Graham Joyce and Tom Piccirilli, competitions, a chat room which you can drop into at any time, links to many other sites, art galleries and much more. You can leave messages and reviews, and even enrol in the new TTA Press Writing Centre. Please visit the website and join the mailing list via our 'listbot'. You will then be notified automatically by email of every new edition of *Shadowlink*.

DAVID THOMPSON, ST AUSTELL

I've read TTA17, and found it, shall we say appalling, but then I'm biased, and eccentric – it's his age you know – I don't see life through an intellectual's eyes. I like a bit of humour, and being round the twist, like to encourage others make a fool of themselves. My brother liked the stories, so I will subscribe to four issues and see what happens.

I read in one of my books, that you should show not tell. A writer starts out writing as if talking to himself, later he learns about the technical side. These stories are all narration, where is the character? The Doll Thief. Doesn't make sense. Here you have a tramp, I suppose, nothing tells me otherwise. Sat in the roots of a tree, from which he later climbs out of – some tree roots if he has to climb out – watching a youngster playing. No youngster would go within a hundred miles of a man hiding in the trees. He then sees blood on a piece of glass, has he got telescopic eyeballs.

The Aspect, tells us more about the author than the character, like a seventeen year girl giving herself an orgasm in the bath. Nothing to tell me about the character, is she mentally disabled, or just an only child?

I've sent off for about ten short story magazines, I've yet to find one that offers a good read. Even the London Magazine can't manage it. One of their stories in the June/July issue, tried and failed at humour, he missed the point by a mile and no character to speak of.

As an editor, surely you can sort out some well written stories. Everyone has different tastes for content, but where has the story telling gone; Introduction, rising action, climax.

I tried three writing schools about ten years ago, the biggest con-trick since Moses staggered down the mountain with half a dozen grave stones. I've written four novels, number five ran into a brick wall when I had bronchitis, number six was all wrong. I failed to attract an agent because of my grammar and punctuation, that was about three years ago. I've learned a little since then, now I write short stories. Of the twelve or so short stories I've done, nine have been sent off. Two returned, we don't accept stories unless you subscribe to our magazine, catch 22.

Bitter! No. I'm too old to worry about getting published, to pander to the whims of someone that only wants his pay packet at the end of the week. I'm more interested now in offering a helping hand, without pay, to aspiring young writers, as long as I don't see them too often.

So, please, let us have a bit more selection in the technical department and a little less intellectual gobblegook, yes! I know what it means, I looked it up.

JAMES McCONNON, LONDON

I love the Slipstream Cinema feature, but I must admit to a small complaint about Mike O'Driscoll's piece on David Lynch, although to be fair to him it is a peeve I also feel towards a number of critics. That is his opinion of Bowie's performance in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*.

The guy was in the film for approximately twelve seconds. He appeared out of nowhere, screamed, and vanished. No actor on the planet could have made anything of the part. The part made no sense, did not fit into the film's narrative, and was never referred to again (which was probably the point). The only reason the part wasn't played by some extra on union minimum (and possibly the only reason the part existed) was so that they could put the name of one of the biggest and most important pop stars of the twentieth century on the poster.

Not that I'm saying Bowie is a great actor or anything (even my hero worship doesn't stretch that far). He is a large part of the reason that *Absolute Beginners* was so underrated (even if it did produce one of his best singles of the eighties) and that one where he played a hitman is probably best forgotten (in fact I have forgotten its title). Mind you, he wasn't bad in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*, *Labyrinth* or *Basquiet*. And he's never been as bad as Billy Idol in *The Doors*, or Jagger in *Freejack*.

Anyway, I do still like the articles, and look forward to one on Cronenberg, who just has to be in there, doesn't he?

STEVEN TAKLE, EXETER

I find TTA to be fresh and invigorating. The presentation is very hip and together, with the page layouts and accompanying images being both appropriate to the individual stories and the magazine's ethos as a whole. It goes deeper than this however; here is a magazine that I know will take more risks and expose me to more alternatives to mainstream sf. The stories themselves are of a high standard, the interviews very interesting and the features well considered.

Is Allen Ashley courting infamy in his 'Thin Man's Guide' [TTA15], which seems to be singling out Irvine Welsh for a good knocking? Sure, Irvine has become something of a media darling lately, but his prose is engaging and compelling nonetheless. I still balk at calling *Trainspotting* a novel though – prose fiction, yes, a loosely connected sequence of anecdotes, yes, but a novel: no. Welsh has tapped into something that works for him and I wish Allen every luck in achieving the same goal by his own route.

DAVID CURL, LONDON

I'd like to say how much I agree with the thrust of Allen Ashley's editorial [TTA16] about British sf/f/h: anyone who owns a cultural cringe should certainly throw it away and yes, thoughtful challenging exciting sf with a Brit style or ideas base is far better than third-rate ersatz Americana written by someone who's never been there. Not that Britishness – or Americanness – is for that matter a monolith, socially or geographically, which is why cracks about 'warm beer' (yawn) belong to those so lacking in imagination that they can only write 50-word listings magazine fillers. I mean, anyone who nails all of sprawling life down to the tree of cliché deserves a smack in the mouth, surely? The only problem with Allen Ashley's editorial is that he stops short of indicting American cultural and political imperialism (hell, America is not only the world's film and video everywhere, but it's also a frequent violator of international law and the world's number one sponsor of state terrorism – read Chomsky, and the newspapers!). Still, mustn't grumble I suppose.

MARK BEECH, WORCESTER

I'm very much enjoying your Slipstream Cinema features. It was great to see the work of David Lynch getting an overview [TTA17], although I was disappointed to find so little of Mike O'Driscoll's article concerned with the *sound* of these films – and by *sound* I don't simply mean music. For anyone who's seen *Eraserhead*, especially at the cinema, one of its most disturbing aspects will doubtless be Lynch and (the great) Alan Splet's tortuously relentless industrial dronescapes, which run the entire length of the film. We have to endure a montage of the noises of distant factories – the hisses and thumps and clangour of the machines – the factory horns and whistles. We hear the wind roaring through the top floors of abandoned warehouses – through empty streets and underpasses – all amplified to an excruciating volume. Finding weirdness in the tiny and mundane. What could be more Lynchian?

He does it again, several times, in *Blue Velvet*. Remember the amplified noises of light-bulbs buzzing, or burning out. Remember the sound of a candle being blown out, made to sound like cannon-fire. Think of the shot directly *after* the one Mike O'Driscoll makes reference to: Jeffrey Beaumont's father collapsed on the lawn, a small dog happily jumping in the spray of his garden hose. We are drawn down to ground level, and further, down into the grass. Finally, if we are left in any doubt of just what lies beyond the rosy facade of this small town, we find darkness, dirt, insects, and we hear their hisses – their tiny limbs clicking and shells cracking at an impossibly exaggerated volume.

Lynch doesn't simply have us look at his rose-tinted world through a shit-smeared magnifying glass, he lets us hear through it too. I doubt he considered the sound of these scenes (or of *Eraserhead*) any less significant than what appeared on the screen. Many of the visual aspects of *Eraserhead* in particular, it could be argued, can be traced back to the films of Dali and Bunuel, Maya Deren, Fritz Lang, FW Murnau and Jan Svankmajer (though I doubt Lynch had seen any of the latter's work in 1976). The use of sound in *Eraserhead* may, in the end, be its one truly original quality, which isn't something that should be underestimated.

There are many more examples of Lynch's preoccupation with sound. Certainly one of the most memorable, and strangest, scenes in *Fire Walk With Me* is the one that takes place in the nightclub, where none of the actors' lines are audible over the noise of the music, and for about ten minutes characters are introduced and conversations take place, lost in an immense wash of white noise. During the David Bowie scene (which I actually quite liked, but never mind) images, noise, dialogue and music overlap, jump, fade in and out. In both scenes, the affect is disorientating, unsettling. We're forced to make up our own meanings, to make sense, drawing together all the fragments, consolidating all the elements. Sound and vision.

Actually, *Lost Highway* is nearly as exhausting as *Eraserhead*, though more diverse. Music and noise run the entire length of the film: ambient tones, ethereal vocals, drones, industrial metal, sleazy-listening and avant jazz, defining every scene, each shot.

Too often, I think, the word 'cinematic' is used to apply solely to the visual aspects of filmmaking. It may be that in most cases filmmakers are content to off-load the problem of how their films will sound on somebody else, to let them depict the mood as far as they understand it. This could hardly be said of David Lynch. I've no doubt the sound of his films is just as important to him as the look of them. I can think of very few filmmakers who have shared in this philosophy, although Derek Jarman and Brothers Quay come immediately to mind, and I can't imagine reading articles on either of *them* without sound and music getting more than just a mention.

David Lynch is one of my favourite filmmakers. The sound of his films is one of my favourite features. Mike O'Driscoll wrote a fine article, doubtless, and I suppose there's always going to be some sad fanboy to find fault in it. Sorry that on this occasion it has to be me.



by Tom Piccirilli

Whar
MARRIED
FESTIN
KNOWS
SERENITY

As always, in the swollen hunter's moon of October, when the autumn winds reach down the ridge and maple branches claw at our roof shingles, my dead brother Stevie dreams of the carnival, and the carnival comes.

My parents spend hours swabbing his chest with ice chips and rubbing alcohol, hoping to keep the fever down and our sins from taking their places in the tents, looming along the freak show, riding the Ferris wheel and giggling on the carousel. There's no point. He's supposed to sweat and mutter his nightmares, though we no longer need to listen. My sisters Karyn and Debbi have done more than simply lock their bedroom doors this year. They've stolen the towing chains off Art Friedkin's pickup, and I hear furniture moving and the clatter of rotted shutters closing. They'll turn up their stereos and listen to songs I don't know. They might even do all their social studies and math homework tonight, or torture roaches in the corner, anything to keep from thinking about the midway and sideshow, Electra and the fat woman and the pickled punk.

Opossums and raccoons skitter in the woods. The noises of the carnival setting up drift back over our woodshed and yard. My father, exhausted after two days of listening to Stevie and all the saints that live inside him, cracks open a bottle of gin and slumbers in front of the television. When his own snores awaken him past midnight he stares at me with fear and abject sorrow, and offers me his belly and throat like some terrified dog. Stevie and I look a lot alike. When he realizes his mistake he says, "Oh God, Michael, why are you still here? Go to your room. Get back into college. Why did you quit, huh? You never told us. Be a doctor, you can do it, I know you can. Go hide. Get away from here." I grasp the neck of the gin bottle, ease it between his lips, and let him take a few more deep swigs. In five minutes he's asleep again, and my mother is whimpering in the bathroom.

She's holding the toenail clippers trying to snap them closed on the thick knot of veins that bulge in her left wrist, but she only manages to tear off a little skin, not even drawing a bead of blood. She eases out the blunt nailfile and tries to stab herself with it, first in the belly where it snags threads of her Afghan sweater, and then in her throat. It only makes her cough. She says, "Mike, kill me, I don't want to go again. You know that, of course you do, you know."

"Yes."

"You can tell, even though you've always liked the balloons. I can't bear listening to him anymore. I've begged him to stop, but he doesn't, he never does. End it. You have to stop him. Murder him. Please..."

"He's not saying anything."

"What?"

"He's quiet. Hear that?"

She listens for a moment and the smile spreads on her face like an oil slick moving down the highway, sitting there trying to laugh but not coming up with anything until she passes out slumped over the toilet. I fold a towel and put it under her head. Karyn and Debbi's stereos are pounding out some reggae songs, kettle drums and big brass horns, and the ice water in the bathtub sloshes from the vibrations.

Stevie has been in a coma since his christening when the bumbling priest with massive hands dappled holy water on his forehead, splashing the way a child might splash in a pond; my mother, her hands slippery with a fruit-scented lotion, drew away to keep her new white dress from getting wet, took an awkward step backwards and broke a heel off one of her shoes, and Stevie's soft head first smashed on the edge of the marble baptismal, and then struck again at the foot of the altar.

My dead brother Stevie hums and gurgles to himself, occasionally saying my name and mentioning secrets and shattered promises I'd made long ago and have long since forgotten. I wash him for a while, feeling the incredible waves of heat rolling from between his eyes. There are shallow nicks around his throat, tiny crusted scabs and scars. His lips continue to move but he's grown silent. I lift him from the tub and press my forehead to his — the martyred saints and angry angels are hovering nearby, that much is clear, but no matter how hard I try to reach into him, to either loosen my burden or to accept a part of his, all that happens is our sweat mingles.

"I'm going, Stevie, don't worry. I'll be there for you tonight. I won't let you down. Tell them no matter what, I'll be there. You tell them."

He'll tell them.

I carry him upstairs and put him in bed, and immediately his fists clench and claw at the blankets. I kiss his brow and watch as his hair wags a little to the heavy thrum of our sisters' music stomping at the walls. The crucifix above his bed trembles. Christ peers at us suspiciously, blood running in his eyes. Roaches that have been cut in half crawl through holes in the floorboards. Stevie's window is open and the sounds of the carnival are even louder now, the top of the Ferris wheel dimly lit in the distance. I move to the front door, open it, and enjoy the feeling of the frigid wind on my face. My father murmurs to his lovers and bastard children — most of them I knew about, but not all. I slip outside and close the door quietly behind me.

I'm two steps off the porch when Debbi opens the shutter and looks down at me. Her black hair whirls against the clapboard like irritated crows. "Why are you going back, Mike? Haven't you seen enough?"

"No, not yet," I tell her, and I'm only slightly stunned to realize it's the truth.

"Did you ever think that maybe it only happens because you like it? Because you keep going back and watching?"

"Yes, I have," I admit.

"He's only doing it because he loves you."

She's only thirteen and hasn't become enmeshed in the useless complexities of guilt and loss and redemption. She broke up with her first boyfriend a couple of weeks ago and the kid still comes around to pine and leave love letters on the porch. Debbi throws them in the garbage without reading them, and talks of other cute boys.

His name is Chuck and he has an embarrassed grin and a frown of uneven agitation and bewilderment that swamps his face. I can already see the rage building in him, an imp forever cooing in his ear. He'll never get over this, not even after his third divorce or the birth of his fifth grandchild. He'll be just as furious and in just as much pain on his deathbed, and he'll die hissing my sister's name.

Perhaps Debbi has a right to be afraid. Perhaps I should have tried harder to protect her.

Karyn rushes down the stairs and out the front door, where she glares at me with her bottom lip quivering. "You're killing Mom and Dad. You and him. The two of you are murdering the rest of us, you know that, don't you? Is that what you want? Do you like it? You must." Her voice cracks like a Dresden doll thrown against the ground. "Why do you hate us so much?"

Her face is haggard for a sixteen-year-old, drawn and thin with her eyes so dark they're clouded and discoloured, and there's no reflection in the tears twining down her cheeks. I move to do something, but I'm not sure what. Maybe to hug her, maybe only to plead with her. I see the kitchen knife in her fist, she's clutching it so tightly that her hand is shaking wildly. The blade whistles sweetly. So that's where the cuts on Stevie's throat come from. She holds the knife the way other teenagers hold car keys or lit joints or boys' hands: with great satisfaction and a resistance to let go.

She says, "Go on if you want to, I'm leaving tonight. This is it for me. You'll never see me again." She looks down as if she sees Stevie there, because we always have to look down to see him: in his bed, in the tub, slithering across the floor whispering to our ankles. Jabbing at the air with the knife, she makes to eviscerate me, cutting loose my liver, my lungs, digging in after my heart. "I won't let you kill me, Mike."

"I'd never..."

"Shut up! I'm leaving, you hear me? God damn you!" Karyn's hair, even blacker than Debbi's, shines like wet blood in the moonlight. She flings the knife at me and it goes wide into the woods. She wheels back inside and slams the door.

I turn and head up the dark road leading past McCrombie's farm and the weed-choked orchards where my ex-wife Beth and I first made love. It takes about a half hour to reach the bramble patches and the rock-strewn empty fields beyond the hillocks that roll down to the carnival grounds. Crumbling leaves kick up around my knees, and the dust is awful.

Trucks and cars are lined up parked in a sea of chrome and rust, and the carousel fife music is already playing. Cotton candy lingers in the breeze. Children are laughing. Art Friedkin's pickup is there with a new set of chains. The food stands are open and the high-strung colourful lights are burning beneath the red moon. The rides haven't started yet and the main tents are still furled, a hundred ropes tangled as men work diligently to get them up.

They've been waiting for me.

Most of my neighbours pay no more or less attention to me than anybody else. Deep growls of brutish, mechanical laughter erupt from the funhouse. Silent clowns with the faces of my father waddle and jiggle and hand out balloons, patting kids on top of their heads and mimicking great belly laughs, flopping and dancing around. Someone points at me, and then someone else. And someone else. A child gurgles my name but is quickly shushed. My forehead is still warm and covered with my brother's dried sweat. The tents are slowly rising.

Mrs Hoopler and a gang of blue-haired biddies encircle me with plaintive mumbles of friendship and a flamboyant display of affection. They like to touch, to squeeze and plant their thick, slug-like waxy lips wherever they can leave marks and slimy trails. Mrs Hoopler puts a corpulent arm around my shoulder and I nearly scream in her ear. My breathing is hitched and coming in gasps, and I'm trying hard not to moan. The clowns flutter their fingers

at me. Mrs Hoopler's teeth are orange from the moon and her lipstick. She says, "Michael, so nice to see you again!"

Of course it is. "Hello, Mrs Hoopler."

She takes a slow spin among her friends, as if checking around for enemies, assassins, the unworthy. I'm all of that, and more. I suddenly feel much calmer as I shrug into this familiar role. She stares off behind me with a poorly fashioned expression of puzzlement, squinting, searching. "I trust your parents will be along at any moment."

"No, they won't be."

"But your mother loves the carousel so."

"No."

"And your father enjoys the house of mirrors, I remember him making those funny faces. And your sisters...?"

"No."

"...surely they're here somewhere?"

"No, they're not."

"We'll see them later then?"

"No, they're at home. They won't be coming tonight."

The biddies all gasp and mutter and walk around me like pecking birds. A man with a deep voice shouts my name and there's a barrage of girlish giggles. Art Friedkin shouts that he wants his chains back or he'll sue. Mrs Hoopler tries to press me to her bosom, her hand tightly grasping my neck, dragging me forward. "But tonight's the carnival!"

As if I didn't know. "Yes."

"Your carnival!"

"Yes."

"Michael, really..."

"No."

"...I simply can't believe that..."

"Shut up," I say, "you dirty goddamn bitch, or I'll tear your fucking throat out."

It does the trick. She lets me go and I back away glaring, the other blue-haired old women now slack-jawed for the moment but seeming so enraptured by this show of anger, my sins on exhibit for everyone to see. They've gotten so greedy, nothing is enough. They begin to grin and cackle, one after the other down the line, the entire row of them. How will this appear in the sideshow?

The people of town swell and swarm. My ex-wife Beth is sitting with Jesse Calhoun — when he was a football star she couldn't stand him at all, but since the car accident that left six people dead and him with a plate in his frontal lobe, she refuses to be separated from him. Jesse's head has an odd tilt and he walks with a severe limp, and from his bottom lip dangles strands of silver saliva. His skull still crackles like embers popping. He's incapable of forming multi-syllabic words, and does little more than roll his eyes eerily and grunt most of the time.

Beth smiles as widely as any of them, and I wonder why she's having such a good time. Many of my failures are no less a part of her life as they are of mine. Would I have done all I did if she hadn't lied about being pregnant in the eleventh grade? Would I have fallen before all my weaknesses if my life hadn't derailed standing beside her before the stern-faced judge? Was medical school that much of a dream? Would Stevie have shown some pity?

The tent is up.

We surge forward across the midway, where Beth drags Jesse to the concessions, past the rides and directly towards the freak show. Banners and pictorials on canvas hang in front of sideshow depicting the wonders to be found inside.

The Pitch Man needs to do nothing but smile and point his bamboo cane. My neighbours leer and stare without remorse, and I don't much blame them. I'd do the same, I think. He takes their proffered dollars and hands out tickets, and the kids jump up and down clapping. His straw hat shadows his eyes, and I wonder which of my sins he represents. Another clown with my father's face hands me a balloon, and I shuffle inside the darkness with all the rest.

The albino act is first, and it's me because I spend too much time indoors, reading and hiding when I should be off somewhere attaining the life I've dreamed of for so long, having children, visiting Europe, riding a '68 rag-top Mustang down through Mexico. Beth titters, and others join in. My albinism is total, a complete absence of epidermal pigmentation: I am nothing but bone-white skin, white hair, white eyelashes and eyebrows, and tiny pink irises. This is one form of my cowardice, taken shape. He stares at me wanting to say something, hoping to hear my vows to change, to find courage, to get back out in the sun. At his feet there is a body, of course — there are always corpses because I always rage. It's a woman, and she's been haphazardly shoved under his bed of rags. There are long streaks of dried blood on his white hands because I've murdered again...maybe it's Mrs Hoopler, more likely it's Beth. There are some guffaws and titters, and we move on.

The devil baby is displayed in a tiny coffin, this one with horns, fangs, hooved feet, and broken claws, stacked beside the pickled punk, a two-headed human foetus in a specimen jar. Their mouths move the same way Stevie whispers to me, and I bend close to the jar trying to listen, hearing only my own breathing. The eyes of the two-headed foetus blink at me, tiny bubbles drifting from their noses.

Perhaps it's me in the next stall, perhaps my father. Here we are the lowest of the belly-crawling, rat turd-covered low: the alcoholic geek who bites off the heads of live animals to get another drink. We hold a chicken in the left hand, a snake in the right, and take turns nibbling first on one and then the other, grinning hideously because whatever pride we once had has leaked free from our rotted, poisonous pores. The sweat streaming from us smells like corn mash liquor. The geek throws the decapitated bodies of the chicken and snake down at my feet, and smiles at me with a mouth full of beak, fang, and glowering eyes.

My sisters work the girlie show, dancing with their cellulite bobbling from around their bikini shorts, thick welts and scars showing from where their drunken husbands have beaten them with hangers, shimmying while they smile emptily, pretending just how racy this hootchie kootchie can be. Roaches without antennae or legs flop at their feet. Debbi gives a come-hither look that makes my stomach tumble. Most of her teeth are gone, and her nose has been broken several times and poorly reset.

Karyn is also the obese woman as well as the skeletal woman, because she continues to battle bulimia; on the stage she's emaciated from disease and muscular disorder, her heart plainly seen beating beneath the tissue-thin skin, seated side by side with herself who is too bloated to move from the little stone stool they've given her, with rolls of fat dripping from her back so that she can't even hold her arms out to me. She sounds like a great toad, her tongue barely able to slip between her bulbous lips when she tells me, *Kill him, go home and kill him*. This is a road I can see her on; I've already caught her vomiting after eating a breath

mint, and watched her on her hands and knees worrying a bone we'd thrown in the dog's dish.

My father has had many affairs with his neighbours' wives. He's a dozen bawdy clowns dancing around all the pretty women in the audience, rolling his eyes and clapping his hands and miming great barrel laughs as he strolls by kids and chases ladies. He retrieves the balloon he's already handed me and goes over to give it to Beth. She curtseys and he curtseys with her in his giant baggy pants, and she does it again and so does he, and she falls into his arms laughing as Jesse Calhoun dribbles more spit on himself, and my father tries to make it with my ex-wife.

The electric chair act is not an act. My mother once killed a man over a parking space. It was in a shopping centre, about ten miles out of town, backing out without checking to see if there might be another car already pulling in. Her hair was freshly dyed, lipstick well applied. The guy slammed his brakes and got out to shriek about being cut off, shouting, "What are you blind, you stupid bitch? You almost took out my left quarter panel!" My mother frowned and didn't listen and started pulling out again, too quick on the gas, the rear bumper hitting him squarely across the pelvis and flipping him over the trunk, where he dropped back and rolled sideways under the rear tires and she backed over his throat. She took out his left quarter panel and drove home nervously but without much guilt. At various times she pretended it had never happened at all, or that it had happened but was somehow the man's fault.

Our neighbours flock around to bear witness, elbowing one another to get a better view. The banner behind her reads ELECTRA: WOMAN OF TEN THOUSAND VOLTS! My mother sits in the electric chair weeping, and the presumed illusion that she's being electrocuted begins: smoke swirls from her fiery hair, flames launch from her teeth, her skin bubbles and melts and runs off her skull. My father, chuckling with his bitter hatred for her, pulls the switch again and again and again as she yelps and begs and burns in her seat.

Everyone applauds.

So do I.

My forehead is beginning to ignite. I gasp for air but it's a good feeling, way down deep in my chest and soul, where the real power comes into play.

Chuck, Debbi's first boyfriend, wanders over to stand nearby but not too close. Only Chuck seems to realize that he too is a part of the entertainment, that the laughter, the derision, the living anguish also envelops him because he is a part of my family, or at least wants to be. He's crying, or maybe just pouting, sniffling heavily. He hands me a note to give to my sister and recedes into the crowd.

We leave the freak show and enter the main tent.

The oohs and ahhs are deafening. The clown gives my balloon back to me, his greasepaint smudged from Beth's kisses, her familiar musk all over him. My dead brother Stevie floats in mid-air above a huge pile of Arabian silken pillows, with his eyes glowing like heat-lightning over the empty orchards, his mouth hanging open without a tongue, blazing, whimpering our salvation. I cannot confess my sins, nor can my parents or my sisters, and so Stevie's taken it upon himself to confess them for us.

I step free from the throng and move towards my brother. The Pitch Man, still smiling, blocks my path with his bamboo cane. His straw hat has tipped slightly and I see

his eyes, my own eyes and my father's and anyone's eyes who hold any regrets, and know he is my greatest sin: my own sin of martyrdom, the joy I get from our carnival.

At least Stevie knows contentment, bearing the burden of my many fears and failures, and the sleeper continues to sleep. Now it's my turn — I lay upon the pillows in the tent as a world of fatigue settles in. Beth, with red paint smeared across her chin, turns and frowns. Jesse Calhoun rolls his eyes and shudders happily. Mrs Hoopler yells, "What the hell do you think you're doing, Michael?" Stevie glances down and his flaming mouth forms a smile.

He'll have his chance at life and love, and what it means to have a dead brother in the tub. What it means to have salvation at the cost of ultimate, perverse shame. Maybe he'll become a doctor and grow very tan driving a rag-top Mustang down through Cabo San Lucas and Mazatlan. I'll sleep and whisper his name, and save his soul, and he'll wander the carnival and witness his own living sins, and he'll see me in my newfound serenity.

I hand him Chuck's note. He nods and knows what to do with it, already looking depressed. Life is like that. He'll wait for his inadequacies to crawl and squabble and leer at him from the freak show, with their pointed heads, rubber bodies, and stony flesh, with nails driven into their hands and feet and skull, and he'll stare at the heads of snakes and chickens until his perfectly pious mouth waters.

Tom Piccirilli is the author of *Dark Father*, *Pentacle*, *Shards*, *Hexes*, *The Dead Past*, and *Sorrow's Crown*. He's co-editor of *Pirate Writings*, fiction editor of *Epitaph* and *Space & Time* magazines, and occasionally reviews books for *Mystery News*, *Horror*, and *The Barnes & Noble Website*. His short fiction has sold to countless major anthologies and magazines, and he has an omnibus collection of 40 stories and over 200,000 words of fiction entitled *Deep Into That Darkness Peering* out soon from Terminal Frights Publishing.

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DISCOVER THE TALENT, TRAVEL THE ROAD...

POSTCARDS FROM LENINGRAD

(1)

The Metro Ride: 7th September, 1983

After everything I've told you about the Soviet Union, I'm sure you're wondering why I've come back here for a year. Since riding on the Metro yesterday, I'm starting to ask myself the same thing. When you're away from this place you forget just how inimical it is towards normal human existence. It's as if whoever designed the Soviet system wanted it to be hostile to humanity. I can't imagine a more anti-people place.

Remember the copy of *The Best of Philip K* *Dick* that I sent you last year?

Well, just re-read 'Colony' to put yourself in the right mood for this series of postcards. If I didn't know that PKD never really left California, I would swear that 'Colony' was inspired by a visit to the USSR. Being paranoid and thinking everyone is out to get you is all very fine. But PKD's talent was to ratchet everything up to a whole new level and put you in a world where everything is out to get you. That world is Leningrad. Let me take you for a ride on the Metro and you'll see exactly what I mean.

Yesterday, as I approached the Metro entrance, I could feel that little burst of adrenaline that you get when you know you're about to do something dangerous. I almost wanted to laugh it off — after all, I was only taking the Metro back to the dorm. But instead I stared at the six glass doors in front of me and took a deep breath.

In typical Soviet fashion, only four of the doors were open. I've never gone in a Soviet structure where all the doors worked. Usually only one of four is unlocked so the fact that four of six were open was a bit of an accomplishment. As I hovered near the entrance, I saw Soviets trying to enter through the locked doors only to bounce off like birds hitting plate glass windows that they don't know are there.

I chose a door. Approaching one is all a matter of timing. Each door weighs a ton. And when they get that extra push from the Metro's wind-tunnel effect they can slam right into you and break your face or hands. Some Soviets seem to enjoy releasing the doors in order to ensure maximum damage. So either you step back and let the door slam or you go through right after someone else without giving them a chance to hurt you.

As I wasn't in a trusting mood, I went through alone — although I had to lean hard into the glass to open it. As I was about to let go of the door, I noticed an old *babushka*

behind me. I held the door open for her and she thanked me as if I had just saved her life. Maybe I had.

The next hurdle to negotiate was an easy one. A ride on the Metro costs just 5 kopecks. Instead of using tokens, you use a 5 kopeck coin. The inside of a Metro station is filled with change machines. Soviet lo-tech being what it is, there aren't any generic change machines that can break down any coin into 5 kopeck pieces. Instead there are separate change machines for each particular coin: the 10 kopeck machine gives you two 5 kopeck pieces, the 15 kopeck machine spits out three coins, and so on down the line.

As half of these change machines are broken at any given time (you never know which ones), using one is a bit like playing the slots. You never know if you'll win or lose. Most Soviets aren't gamblers so they were queued up at the ticket window. Taking a risk, I put a 20 kopeck piece in the appropriate machine and was thrilled to hear the happy tinkling of four coins. I hate waiting in line.

Although I had my 5 kopecks in hand, I was careful not to start feeling too lucky. The next obstacle facing me was the dreaded Soviet Metro turnstile. These turnstiles look remarkably inviting. They appear to present no threat at all. It looks like you could just walk right on through them. But looks can be deceiving.

A little red light shines on one side of the turnstile. If you walk through with the red light on, you'll live to regret it. So what you do is drop the 5 kopeck piece into the appropriate slot, wait for the red light to turn green, and then walk through. You can't wait too long or the light will turn back to red.

What happens if you go through on the red? Well, a couple of years ago, I put in my coin but for some reason it didn't take. I failed to notice and walked through. What a mistake. I tripped the electric eye and the turnstile launched its twin metal guards which slammed right into my thighs. I had huge purple bruises for three weeks. The metal guards are designed to cause serious pain if you try to walk through without paying. It was then that I understood that everything really was out to get me. I nicknamed the turnstiles 'kneecappers' because that was their secret function.

Yesterday I panicked. I stood in front of the turnstile hesitating about whether I should go through. The people behind me started complaining and pushing me



forward. The female employee who checks people's monthly passes yelled at me from her little aluminium and glass booth. So I took another deep breath, put in my 5 kopeck piece, waited for the green light, and walked through the gauntlet in one piece.

But I had no time to enjoy my little victory. I was immediately crowded onto the old wooden escalator. Leningrad's escalators run at twice the speed as the ones in my hometown of Washington, DC. I guess no one here has to worry about getting sued. And since the Metro in Leningrad is so deep (they had to dig under all of the rivers, canals and swamps), the escalators are designed to zip you right down to the bedrock.

I stood on the right, hanging on to the moving handrail for dear life. My friend Eric told me about the time he was riding on an escalator late at night when it suddenly stopped. People went flying into the air. Eric escaped without any damage because he happened to be hanging on. But others were less fortunate. There was a pile of people at the bottom of the escalator bleeding from dozens of open cuts. Arms and legs were bent in directions they were never designed to move.

With my hand gripped to the rubber rail, I took a moment to do some people-watching. The only Soviets who ever made any eye-contact with me on the opposite escalator were two young school girls in their brown uniforms trimmed with white lace. The usual oversized bows adorned their hair. For a minute, I watched Leningrad go by: workers in their dark blue work clothes; naval cadets with Ks on the epaulets of their black uniforms; women with bags full of potatoes; and a drunk whose face was so red it glowed.

At the bottom of the speeding escalator, I jumped off and almost slipped on the dusty marble floors. I cursed myself for wearing shoes with leather soles. You think I would know better by now. As I struggled to keep my balance on the slick surface, I got pushed by the crowd towards the Metro platform. I had another panic attack about ending up on the rails.

When the train finally came, I got pushed into the car with all of the other people around me. The recording warned 'Ostozhno, dveri zakryvaiutsia' ('Watch out, the doors are closing') and then slammed shut. There's no one really controlling the closing of the doors — it's all automatic. So if you're foolish enough to try to get on after you've been warned not to, you get what's coming to you. Like the turnstiles, the train doors are designed to inflict maximum pain.

Which brings me to yesterday's main event. When the doors slammed shut, they trapped an old man halfway inside the car, halfway out. Even if the doors hadn't knocked him senseless, their vice-like grip would have made it difficult for him to move. As the train started accelerating out of the station, I had this awful feeling that we were going to leave half of him behind on the wall of the approaching tunnel. Some of the other people nearby grabbed him and were doing their best to pull him into the crowded car. At what seemed like the last possible moment, they yanked him in. The door slammed shut the rest of the way just as we reached the narrow tunnel.

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EA JOHNSON

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A STRANGER'S HOUSE

RON BUTLIN



Tony's neighbours had a map of Paradise tacked to their bedroom wall. They lived at the other side of the valley where they'd been working themselves brain-dead for years with hammering, digging and screaming at each other all the hours God sent. Tony, the perfect host, was rolling a megajoint to celebrate our arrival in the wilderness and had reached the tricky stage of tight-twisting the end.

"This is the Land of Oz," he went on. "Dig your crapper, build your shack, then relax and start living. But not pioneering Marshall! Fence-posted the whole place first: one thousand and thirty-seven of the fuckers to mark out which bit of Australia was his."

The joint was ready now. He lit it.

"A life of breeze-blocks and cement ever since!"

Darkness had fallen and by the light of the paraffin lamp I could see the deeply tanned face, the black curly beard and the smile I recognised from years back.

But Marshall's place had to be seen, he added later. And the man's eyes! Thérèse and I were to take a good look: no one had eyes like that back in Britain.

The heat was like a blow to the face when we stood in the doorway of the hut next morning; the insect-noise was already set at full volume. Sunlight glared back at us, its harshness becoming an unsteady haze only with distance and giving the trees across the valley a slowed-down underwater look. A first step, and all insect-noise was abruptly switched off. There was a sudden tension, an urgency we could feel surrounding us as if the valley was holding its breath. No clouds, no jet-trails; the sky arranged around a solitary stillness, an eagle perhaps, pinned invisibly into position a mile or so above us. A few steps later, and the insect-clamour was restored to rasping up and down its single-note scale.

The track began over by the paddock; we should follow the wheel-ruts of broken stones for a mile or so until they petered out. We began walking, and sweating. As yet, Thérèse hadn't said a word; some mornings she woke trapped between being French and British and had to concentrate, it seemed, more than usual. Twenty years old, thick black hair, olive skin and a fondness for silver jewellery — the rest of her was a mystery at times like these. Quarter of an hour later, having just gone through a small wood crammed with the chatter and rush of wild budgerigars, we collided with the sun again. Sweat started running from every pore and the flies stuck to our skin until they were knocked off.

"What's the big rush? *Sont les vacances, eh?*" I heard Thérèse calling to me and turned to see her a few yards back, still keeping to the last bit of shade.

I gave her an encouraging smile. "It's not far. Another five minutes." There was no response; she was staring at me as if I'd not even spoken. "Maybe even less."

She didn't move. Meanwhile I was the one getting cooked. "I'll just go up to the corner and check. Probably be able to see it from there." I went off before she could protest. I'd only be gone a few minutes, after all.

After the turn in the path I looked over to the right. Marshall's place lay like a design branded by the heat onto the bare grass field below.

According to Tony, the man had only ever had one idea in his head: he'd planned out every square inch of ground, then drawn it to scale with every detail marked, and stuck it to the bedroom wall of his shack. The buildings had grown each at exactly the same rate — which explained why none of the walls I could see was much more than a couple of feet high.

Some doors stacked under plastic sheeting had started to rot; window frames, together with slates, paving slabs and lengths of plank were arranged in heaps according to size. Many of the frames were smashed, the slates and paving slabs broken, the planks split — the various piles were tufted here and there with grass and brightly coloured weeds. At first glance it was difficult to tell whether the site was under construction, or in the process of being dismantled one brick at a time.

The shack where they slept stood in the far corner. I was to enter it only once: in the closed room the heat was to feel like nails being driven into my skin; and the wooden floor was to burn under my feet like fire.

Gazing down at Marshall's place, I was suddenly aware of being completely by myself in the middle of the wilderness. It was my first moment of separation from Thérèse since our arrival. The insect-noise was louder than ever, the brilliance of the light seemed to have sharpened the long yellowed grass where, every few seconds, there was a rustle and slither of things unseen.

When Thérèse joined me we went down the slope to where the path ended in a patch of baked earth. Marshall was coming towards us. An overgrown schoolboy complete with stuck-on beard, shorts and sandals; instead of a satchel he wore a plastic cylinder strapped to his back. Even before saying hello to us he called his wife over, then knelt at her feet. She'd been sitting in the shade of a tattered Martini umbrella and must have been aware of our approach for some time. His first words to us were shouted: "Lysenko. Ever heard of him?"

Two polite shakes of our heads were our only contribution to the discussion which followed. We stood in the blistering heat a few yards from the kneeling schoolboy while a woman who seemed younger, but evidently played the mother in his life, looked at us over the top of his head and poured chemicals into the tank on his back. She was in her late twenties, hard faced, with long straggly hair, and was dressed in a T-shirt and purple underskirt; she was barefoot, her skin burnt brown-black. While the sun pressed down on us, wringing sweat out of every pore, we heard the history of planned farming methods as devised by Lysenko for Revolutionary Russia.

Tank filled and cap screwed safely back on, he scrambled to his feet. We introduced ourselves as friends of Tony's, having met him in Britain years ago and kept in touch ever since. But it was obvious Marshall was only waiting for us to stop talking. Eyes glazed and shifting his weight from foot to foot in frustration at being kept from his work, he looked more like a schoolboy than ever. After a short pause following my asking how long it would be until the building work was finished, he nodded as if in agreement and said he might see us for a billy of tea when he was through. Then he went up to Thérèse and stared her straight in the face: "Nothing out here, woman, but what really matters." He stood and waited for her to make some reply.

She didn't.

At the last moment she smiled, the first smile I'd seen from her in days. He grinned a schoolboy grin, gave us all a wave, then trotted off, his cylinder bouncing up and down on his back.

As she turned towards us, his wife didn't bother to disguise her weariness. She introduced herself as Rose. We didn't stay.

having escalated far beyond the problems of mosquitoes, heat, fresh air or whatever was at issue, she retreated into a rigid silence, the heartpoint of a fury that neither of her two languages could reach. So, and not for the first time either, I left her biting her lips and digging her nails into her palms. She was glaring up at me from where she sat in a patch of sunlight that could only get hotter. Probably she would stay there for hours. Okay then, so let her.

If Tony had not ridden out for the mail; if Vicky had not been fast asleep under the veranda; if I'd not been so pissed off with Thérèse...then I wouldn't have gone into automatic and marched off by myself. Within five minutes I was sticky with sweat and dunned into a stupor by the heat and the flies. The path would take me to Marshall's eventually, if I didn't watch out; and so I meant to turn off into the woods, soon. That was the plan.

After walking for a while I stopped for a moment to watch a wallaby bound down the slope and across the open ground towards the river. Then I heard someone shouting. A few more steps took me in sight of Marshall's place: the schoolboy pioneer was jumping up and down in a tantrum, waving his arms like a windmill and bellowing; seated under the Martini umbrella as before, and seemingly paying no attention to him, was Rose. At once I left the path and cut away to my left hoping to bypass them altogether. The deeper I went into the wood the fainter became Marshall's shouting until finally I could hear only the parakeets, the galahs, the budgerigars...

When I emerged ten minutes later I had not quite reached the far edge of the property, a slight miscalculation. Neither of them were in sight. I had no reason to go down there, no wish to meet them — yet down I went. The day had settled to a deadening weight on my head and shoulders. Having zigzagged through the dry crackle of long grass I reached the boundary fence. Of course, I should have called out to ask if anyone was there, but I didn't. An easy climb over the wire, a detour to avoid a collapsed heap of rusted pipes tangled with weeds and butterflies, the heat radiating from the metal as I passed it, and I had reached the side of their wooden shack. I stopped. A prick of conscience, perhaps, made me picture Thérèse as she would be at that moment: sitting exactly as I had left her and basting her sullenness in the heat. That's where I should have been: with her. Not this creeping like a thief around a stranger's house.

The hillside opposite was in haze. By squinting my eyes into the glare I could just make out Marshall scything the long grass at the far edge of his property. I knocked on the door, but not too loudly, as sound travels. I waited, listened. Then knocked again. No reply. Marshall's faint outline rippled back to me through the heat as his scythe swung and cut, swung and cut. No sign of Rose. I turned the handle and went in.

With the only window shut and its blind pulled down, the room was like an oven. Not a breath of clean air; yet there was an unexpected stillness, a sense of refuge from the insect-noise and the harsh sun that blazed down onto the world outside. The blind was bleached colourless and so threadbare that, here and there, sharp points of light burned into the walls and ceiling. An old-fashioned bed with a massive headboard took up most of the space, the rest being cluttered with cardboard boxes piled two or three high. The bed was unmade, a plastic bag of clothes had half-spilled onto the floor. There were no books, no pictures except for the sketch-map Tony had mentioned. My shirt stuck to my back, sweat was trickling down my legs. I picked my way over to take a closer look at the map.

Rose's voice: "Paradise'll be another five years."

I turned, ready to give her some kind of apology for being in her house.

She was standing just inside a small doorway at the back of the room, completely naked. Her body was mottled black and blue with bruises.

"Yes, that's the plan. Paradise in five years — but will we be ready for it?"

She came over to within a couple of feet of me. I tried to look away. Her hair was loosely pinned up, but only at one side. There was a raw-looking weal just under her left breast.

"I'm being flippant, of course. We were ready when we first arrived. It's since then that we've gone off the boil." A purple-black bruise ran down from her shoulder to her thigh, the buckle mark cutting deep. "I walked into a door, of course."

Finally I managed to speak: "Why don't you leave him?"

She brushed a stray fall of hair from the side of her face. "Do you want to fuck? That's why you're here, isn't it?"

On the shelf above the bed the colours of a polished stone were bleeding into the surrounding wood; next to it, a barometer nailed to the wall showed 'Fair' — I felt an almost irresistible urge to tap the glass.

"Lysenko the Second'll not be back for another hour if that's what's worrying you." She didn't smile.

I had half-raised my hand — to touch her or to make some gesture of uncertainty, who knows?

She took a step back. "A fuck, I said. Nothing more." She sat down on the edge of the bed. "You can start by getting stripped." She paused, then added, "Or you can leave."

There was a sudden scrabbling overhead as a bird landed on the metal roof. Rose gave no sign of having heard it. I stood still, not knowing what to do or what to say. With a kick the bird lifted itself free. Rose's face was burnt dark brown by the sun, the skin looked leathery-hard with faint wrinkles around the eyes. Five, ten years older than me? It was difficult to tell.

"Excite you, does it? Looking?"

"Rose, I — "

"A fuck, I said, nothing more. No names."

I glanced over at the map again. There was a matchstick couple standing outside the house; they were holding hands.

"Well?" She had stood up. Her face looked harder than ever, her eyes burning. "Forget the bruises." She reached up, grabbed a breast in each hand, leaving her fingers open so that the large nipples stuck out. She squeezed them. Her expression didn't change.

There was a dry cracking sound in my throat as I swallowed.

"Like it, do you?" I hesitated and had been about to say 'Yes' when she shrugged and let her hands fall to her sides. "Wasting my time, aren't I?"

To let her pass I had to take a step back, nearly stumbling over one of the boxes.

At the doorway she had first come through she stopped. "I'm going to take a piss. You can watch if you want or stay here, get stripped and wait." She paused. "Or you can get the fuck out of my house." Then she disappeared into the next room.

A moment later, all but blinded by the sudden fierceness of the sun, I was scrambling up the slope. Marshall was still methodically scything the grass.

Tony was not yet back when I returned, Vicky was not yet awake and, from the grim silence of Thérèse's greeting, I might as well never have been away.

THREE

The shack where Tony and Vicky lived was halfway up the slope on one side of the valley. It had been nailed together from recycled wooden pallets, chipboard and tarpaulin added to the remaining two walls of a house that had long been abandoned. Tony boasted that it could be redesigned within an hour should the mood take him — so far it never had. There was no electricity, the water came from the river, and there were as many insects inside as out. Last thing at night the bed was checked for wrigglies, first thing in the morning the clothes and shoes were shaken out. Flies by day, mosquitoes by night — and yet the place was comfortable, relaxing. When it was hot they would sit under the tarpaulin veranda, when it rained they kept under the part of the roof patched with corrugated iron. "Cultivate your grass, your vegetables and your peace of mind," Tony explained. One megajoint and the flow of time slowed down to a series of stills: sometimes when Thérèse rose at full stretch on her toes, bringing her hands together to kill a mosquito, she held the position forever and looked more graceful than any ballerina.

At breakfast one morning she was telling me about the dawn chorus. "*La Cantate des Oiseaux*," she laughed. The birds' cantata had been a real polyphony of screeches, calls and shrieks, starting at first light and building up to a crescendo at the precise moment the sun appeared. "*Quelle joie!* But we've been here nearly a week now and you sleep through it every time."

We could hear a vehicle approaching, a rare event. She stopped speaking.

Tony got to his feet. "Sounds like Marshall."

A dozen yards or so from where we were sitting I saw the pioneer's pick-up shudder to a halt in a cloud of dust. Would Rose be there, too? It was a rusted Toyota with swollen-looking tyres. Over Thérèse's shoulder I watched Marshall climb out of the passenger seat, slam his door and begin to make his way towards us. Tony had gone to meet him.

At that distance and against the white glare of sunlight it was too dim to see into the cab. Would Rose be getting out? Marshall was talking and pointing back along the track. Surely Rose wouldn't have said anything? I could almost smell that closed room again, and sense the violence lingering in the grubby sheets.

"He's a bit like a gnome," Thérèse remarked in a loud voice. Marshall glanced over in our direction but simply gave us a nod of greeting; he didn't seem to have heard. Next to Tony, he looked short and stocky; his beard certainly added to the gnominess.

I was reaching to take her hand and squeeze it as a token of our sharing this opinion of our neighbour, when she turned for a second look at him. So, instead, I made a whispered joke about 'gnomes-sweet-gnomes', which made her smile quite beautifully, then kissed the back of her neck. A short time earlier Vicky had returned from her morning swim to tell us that the herd of wild horses which roamed the property were gathering along the opposite bank when she left.

I suggested we went there immediately, got to my feet and took Thérèse's hand in a playful tug. "Let's not get caught up in the social whirl!"

The pick-up's other door slammed. Rose had got out.

"A polite wave, and we'll go." I put my arm around Thérèse's shoulder and started to lead her away.

Rose had come to the front of the Toyota. She was wearing a check shirt with the sleeves rolled up and baggy jeans.

There was no sign that she had even noticed us; to all appearances she was the patient wife waiting for her rather talkative husband. No suggestion of the woman I had seen naked and bruised a few days before. She began rolling a cigarette.

Thérèse had started asking Vicky about the horses. I watched Rose light up, then turn to face us.

I looked away a split-second too late, she had caught my eye. Giving Thérèse's shoulder a squeeze I interrupted her and Vicky: "We should go, eh?"

At once she stiffened. "What's the big hurry? I'm talking to Vicky."

"Yes, but if we want to see the horses..."

Vicky smiled. "Don't worry, they'll be there for a day or two. Take it easy."

"Rose!" Marshall had called out to his wife. She stopped in her tracks only a few yards short of us.

"Yes, master?" she answered, making everybody laugh. I joined in.

"You know we're in a hurry. Come on, back into the truck."

Still playing the long-suffering wife she raised her eyes to heaven. "Yes, master." On her way back to the Toyota she walked past him and blew smoke into his face. Then she climbed in, switched on the engine, and the truck rolled forward.

"Bitch!" Marshall broke off from talking and had to run up the slope and along the track for several yards before he could clamber into the moving cab. We watched it rattle off, leaving a thick dust-cloud hanging in the air behind it. Already the day was stoking up and the sky becoming a metal blue that would soon be forcing the heat down on us.

Just then, to everyone's surprise, Thérèse picked up a large stick from the woodpile and hurled it after the disappearing truck. "That's for crazy love!" she shouted.

Afterwards we went to see the horses.

FOUR

"Can't keep away from me, can you?" Rose was dressed in a yellow T-shirt and jeans cut off at the knees.

We had met by chance down at the river several days later. Around us, the air was thickening by the minute and the surface of the water had curdled to a leaden dullness. Blue-black clouds were stacked up above the hill while the rest of the sky seemed a hazy colourlessness crisscrossed by birds darting this way and that to escape the approaching storm. Thérèse had withdrawn into the tent some time ago — to be alone, she had said in a tone I could live without hearing for the next few hours. I'd come for a swim.

"Where's your girlfriend?"

Rose was leaning against a fallen tree trunk.

I explained about Thérèse's feeling very tired, probably because of the weather, and that she had wanted to lie down.

"It's time you were taught a lesson you won't forget." She walked off, clearly expecting me to follow. "Come on."

I stayed where I was. From across the river came the call of the whipbird and the female's answering cry. Through the undergrowth small animals were rushing backwards and forwards. A half dozen or so of the wild horses were grouped on the opposite bank, watching us. There was no real sunlight anymore, just an after-brightness so strained by the massing clouds as to have no particular source and no shadow. Everything looked unnaturally sharp-edged and flat. The first heavy drops began to fall.

"I'm not going to fuck you, don't worry." She grabbed my arm and jerked me a few steps forward. "It's not far. I want to show you something, that's all."

With a sudden clattering, tearing sound upon the leaves the storm broke and, almost at once, the rain was coming down in torrents. Within seconds we were soaked through. Rose had to shout to make me hear: "Listen, you're coming with me." She grabbed my shirt and began pulling me. I had to follow — it was either that, or a physical fight.

The two of us squelched and skidded along the mud path. I shielded my eyes against the downpour but she ignored it. Her hair hung in a wet mass with strands stuck across her face.

"Like this on the day Marshall and I first came here," she shouted above the rain. "The mad bastard couldn't wait. A fucking monsoon and he's pacing out where the house is going to be: a stone in each corner, then four stones for the workshed, four for the garage and the rest of the Paradise fuck-up. I stayed in the van about deaf with the rain hammering on the cab roof and watched him, a blur of muscles, shorts and beard heaving rubble around in the mud. That's a really good man you've got there, I thought. Really committed." She halted abruptly and stared straight at me. "Really off his fucking head would have been closer."

She nearly slipped but clung to my arm to keep her balance. We were clambering up the slope by then, like wading through a waterfall. To the right was a derelict wooden shack, rotted and with most of the roof missing. A torn plastic sheet flapped where the window should have been. There was no front door.

"That one did himself in."

"What?"

"A shotgun in his mouth," she yelled into my ear. "Not the first either, not here. Wanting to get away from it all usually means they're half crazy to start with, then they get worse. There's no distractions, not like in the big city. But that's not what I'm showing you, come on."

We had come out of the wood and were looking across to Marshall's, or what we could see of it through the driving rain. The air was still sticky and warm — we skittered down the slope where the path had become nothing more than a mud slide. We would have to slog a further three hundred yards to get to the house, if that's where we were going.

Though the rain was thundering off the metal roof Rose signed for me not to make a sound. She tiptoed up the front step and waved me to follow. The wooden veranda was slippery to walk on but she took my arm and we worked our way along the side of the building, treading cautiously on the sodden planks.

Level with the back window we stopped and for a moment stood side by side looking across the valley. She put her arm around me: the two of us having a last look at Paradise, this battered woman and I. Her warmth seeped into my body. She didn't seem to notice the rain streaming down her face. There was cruelty in her eyes, and an excitement. She raised her hand and drew it down the side of my cheek, but there was no affection in the gesture, no tenderness. She pointed at the closed window with its pulled-down blind; where the material was frayed I could see through into the room.

Suddenly I wanted nothing of this. Who cared what went on between her and Marshall? Him, a mad bastard? She was pretty freaky herself. Maybe they'd set this up between them — her going out to capture me, like some innocent, and bringing me back for whatever devious pleasures they were into. She was standing behind me now, her arms round my waist hugging my chest so that I couldn't free myself without a struggle.

"Take a look," she whispered loudly above the frantic drumming noise of the rain.

At first, as there was no light on, I could make out only the near corner of the bed. Rose was pressing herself hard against me now, her breasts pushing into my back and her hands digging into my chest. The rain was trickling off her hair onto the side of my face.

"See them?"

An abrupt movement in the cabin caught me by surprise and I saw Marshall kneel at the edge of the bed. Then there was a quick blur as someone walked by only inches away, just beyond the screen, and went over to stand beside him.

"Easy, I'm holding you." I heard Rose's voice as if it was coming from a hundred miles away.

I had recognised her black hair first, falling across the older man's face. The gnome she'd called him. The fucking gnome.

We must have gone back along the veranda, down the steps, along the path — but it was not until we were again in the wood and sitting under a tree that I could really take in what I had just seen. I felt very shaky and very much alone on the wrong side of the world. Rose was next to me; she'd taken a tin box out of her pocket and was rolling a small joint. I watched her lick the paper, tight-twist the end and light it. She looked at me and said, "You all right?"

Then I saw the scene in that room again: Marshall and Thérèse embracing, naked.

"Here." She passed the joint over.

I didn't talk and neither did she. After a few minutes she rolled another. And another after that.

Later, when the rain had stopped, we watched Thérèse leave Marshall's shack, walk along the path and disappear where it curved towards Tony's. It seemed to take her an unending length of time.



FIVE
Still feeling stoned I kept missing my footing while above me the stars slid in and out of position. Orion, the only familiar constellation, was flat on his back. From the darkness on either side came the sounds of night creatures — stifled and abrupt. I should have been planning what to say to Thérèse but it took all my concentration to lift and place one foot in front of the other. Finally I caught sight of the candle burning in Tony's window. I'd been gone for nearly half the day: would Thérèse sit and say nothing, continuing her pretence of a bad mood, or else would she smile and make conversation? Which would be worse?

I stood still and took several deep breaths, hoping to sober myself up. The stars looked a little steadier and the ground felt less shifting, but there was only the empty darkness to distract me from seeing her hand resting on Marshall's shoulder and the fanning open of her hair as she leant down to kiss him.

Tony looked up from where he'd been blowing into the cooking-fire. "Where've you been, mate? Went walkabout, did you?"

Thérèse was sitting in the old car seat that served as an armchair. "Easier to find your way back in the dark, was it?" I couldn't see if she was smiling or not.

We had dinner. Afterwards I played chess with Tony, surrounded by the host of insects that endlessly swarmed into the shack through the cracks. Thérèse read a tattered French paperback. Vicky played the guitar. Winged and legged things hopped, fluttered and flopped their way across our candlelit board.

It was nearly midnight when I crawled into my sleeping-bag. Less than a foot away Thérèse had already climbed into hers and lay with her back to me.

"Goodnight, sleep well," she said in a sleepy-sounding voice. The bitch.

"Goodnight," I replied automatically. I could feel my heart beating. Like it or not, what I had to say next was going to start a row. Once started there would be no turning back.

When she shifted her weight slightly the foot of her sleeping bag brushed against mine. I drew back.

There was a hollow, rumbling sound — the wild horses were galloping along the riverbank. Not a good time to begin speaking. I lay flat and could feel the thud of their hooves in the ground under me. She had been naked, and giving herself to that gnome all afternoon. I had to say something. I wanted to shout at her, to punch her in the back. All at once the rumbling stopped.

"You were with Marshall this afternoon." Staring into the darkness I waited for her response. And waited, and waited. The silence between us was becoming urgent. Finally I sat up on one elbow. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"You — and Marshall."

She was keeping her back to me. I put my hand on her shoulder, wrenched her round to face me.

"You and Marshall," I repeated angrily. I could just make out her face in the darkness. This was the woman I'd come halfway round the world with.

"It just happened."

The casualness of her reply was all I needed. "You just happened to find yourself in bed with him?" As I leant nearer I could sense her backing away. "You just happened to leave here without telling anyone, went into his house when he was alone, then into his bed?" I could feel her breath on my cheek. I felt strong, and most of all, right. I felt powerful and filled with justified anger. "Was today the first time?"

"Does it matter?"

Our faces were very close, almost touching. I hissed at her: "You bitch! You fucking bitch!"

A moment later I was on top of her, pressing my whole weight down to crush her. I wanted to hear her cry out in pain. Her hair was lying spread under my hand — I tugged it. "Bitch! Bitch!"

She caught her breath.

I tugged again.

She half-called out. I clamped my hand over her mouth.

That's when I realised I was getting hard. She was biting my fingers. I tugged again and tried to pull my hand free but she grabbed my arm and kept biting. I kicked myself out of my sleeping-bag and unzipped hers. Within seconds we were biting and clawing at each other.

I was about to enter her when, between half-sobs, she managed a breathless whisper: "Turn me over. From the back, from the back."

We began again immediately we woke next morning. More violently even than before. "Such sexy bruises," she whispered to me afterwards as we lay still.

During the following week we made love two or three times a day, tearing at each other in a frenzy. At these moments we were closer than we had ever been before. We would be walking through the woods perhaps, then suddenly begin to chase each other, screaming at the tops of our voices. In no time at all we'd be wrestling, spitting, biting and scratching at each other, rolling over and over in the mud and dust. We'd hit, punch and draw blood, going for the weakest, most

vulnerable parts with our teeth and fingernails — until one of us submitted.

SIX

The day before we were due to leave Tony suggested I take the small pony and ride with him for the mail. "Tombo is very peaceful," he assured me, adding, "a four-hour horse ride is something you will always remember."

And so we set off across the field and out of the valley. We crossed at Currawinya, a fording point where the river split in two, the water rising up to our knees as the horses half-staggered, half-swam through the current. A slowish trot across a patch of woodland, the trees far enough apart for the sun to shine through, making the grass shimmer like velvet, and we reached the foot of a rocky hill. As the horses climbed, every step they took dislodged loose shale and sent it rattling down the slope behind them. The noonday sun dried out our wet jeans. The sky was cloudless and the air silk.

We had just re-entered the valley on our way back and were picking a path between the trees and fallen branches about thirty minutes from Tony's. The jog-jog motion of the pony was hypnotic, and its hooves made a clattering sound on the stones, exactly like in a cowboy film. I felt truly at peace for the first time since arriving here.

At the head of the valley we stopped to let the horses drink from a stream and for me to have a final look round.

Suddenly Tony cried out and pointed: clouds of thick, dark smoke were rising from beyond the edge of the wood, and there was the smell of burning.

A fast trot was all I could manage so I followed after him as best I could, awkwardly lurching from side to side while holding onto Tombo's saddle with both hands. Finally we reached open ground: smoke and flames were belching out through the window and from under the roof of Marshall's house. There was no one to be seen.

We stumbled down the slope, me leaning back in the saddle to keep from falling off. As we approached I could feel the heat and hear the timbers cracking as more of the building caught fire. The horses were very nervous so we dismounted at the fence and struggled to get as close as we could. We cleared away the pile of chopped wood stacked against the veranda, but for the house itself we could do nothing.

At the back we found Rose lying on the ground, coughing and retching; her face was blackened with soot and dirt, her clothes torn.

"Where's Marshall?" we asked.

At first she didn't seem to understand. Tony kept asking her again and again. Finally she pointed to the burning house.

As if her gesture had the power of magic, there was a sudden crash as the doorframe gave way, bringing down most of the front wall. For a few seconds the fire seemed to pause, then it flared up stronger than before. The wind changed direction and we had to move further back. Tony and I dragged Rose over to lean against the wall of the partly-built workshop. She sat between us, in tears; her hands were gripping ours tightly.

Vicky appeared a few minutes later, in time to see the centre beam collapse, followed by the roof; a wall of heat struck us as flames billowed out from the side. According to her, Thérèse had gone for a swim, then for a walk to the summit opposite. She would probably turn up soon.

Rose's fingers clenched mine even tighter. She looked at me but said nothing.

In less than an hour the fire had burned itself out enough for us to pick our way through the wreckage. Everything that

was left was charred, and here and there blackened wood smouldered. The sheets of corrugated iron from the roof were still too hot to touch — the bucketfuls of water we emptied on them threw up clouds of steam, gradually cooling them. It was when we were lifting one of them out of the way that we found Marshall's body, twisted in his last agony. Only by a necklace she'd been wearing was I able to recognise Thérèse.

Rose had driven off to Tabulam for a spare part for the water pump; she'd noticed the smoke just as she was leaving the valley; she had returned to find the fire already far advanced; she'd tried throwing on what water there was but to no effect; the door was locked from the inside; maybe they'd been asleep; Marshall was a heavy smoker and would often leave his cigarettes not properly stubbed out; she'd even taken an axe to the door and kept hacking at it but had been driven back by the heat. She told us all this, sitting up with her back against the unfinished wall: she spoke in a monotone with her eyes staring in front of her, her hands motionless on her lap. There were tears running down her face.

Vicky drove off for help. Darkness was falling when she returned with the doctor and the police. Rose managed to get to her feet when they approached; she told them the same story, almost word for word.

SEVEN

The smell of smoke clung to my skin and hair; all night I could taste it in my mouth. And just beyond, only a few inches away from me in the darkness of the tent, was Thérèse's absence. One minute I wanted to rage at her, to scream at her, and the next to burst into tears. The room where she had burned was everywhere around me: the bed, the clutter of cardboard boxes, the wooden shelf, the map of Paradise tacked to the wall. This was not a dream: I could lie there wide awake and imagine hearing the click of the key in the lock and, somewhere out of sight, in the small back room perhaps, the fire being started. She and the gnome are there, touching, kissing, whispering to each other. I can stop and start the fire at will, I can watch it blaze up into their faces, scorching into their flesh the love and hatred that I feel. I can shout at them, rouse them to the danger they are in.

The night drags on; time and again I build that room around me out of flames, anger and desire. I see every detail of their last moments: Marshall blundering among the toppled boxes towards the door, towards the window. The glass shatters, there's a sudden roar as the fire sucks a rush of air

into the blazing room. Marshall kicks and claws at the wall to batter a way out; eventually he's kicking and clawing only to escape from the searing pain. I hear Thérèse's screams wrenched from deeper within her than any human language; her whole body's turning rigid, abandoning her. She looks to no one to save her — but I am in the room with her at the end, every time.

La Cantate des Oiseaux began at first-light. The tent was filled with the sun's early brightness turned to sea-green as it came through the canvas. In a short time I would have to pack and get ready to leave. My flight from Sydney was in two days. Thérèse's empty seat would be beside me the whole way back. I closed my eyes and heard the dawn chorus approaching its climax.

Several hours later I was awakened by someone calling my name outside the door of the tent. I opened the flap. It was Rose.

Less than twenty minutes later we'd started along the track leading to what remained of her house. As I still had a few hours to spare I had offered to help her make a start on the clearing up. It was going to be another hot day. Sometimes it got so hot, Tony had told me once, that trees would spontaneously burst into flame. Some Paradise.

When we reached the turn in the path we stopped. Neither of us spoke as we gazed down at the devastation. Perhaps because of not having slept all night I sensed I was trespassing into a morning that, for me, had not yet actually begun: the path did not feel solid under my feet, the grass, the trees and the valley itself seemed without substance. It was then I began to understand that whatever length of time I was to remain helping Rose — whether hours, days or years — it would have no duration. Were I to pack and leave as planned, to board the plane, arrive in Britain and take up my life once more — nothing would be changed.

Rose had started telling me again the details of the fire. Every so often when she paused to recover herself I would prompt her and help her continue. The insect-noise was sounding more and more like a scream. I reached towards her, I put my arm on her shoulder to reassure her.

Around us the day was beginning to burn.

Ron Butlin's most recent novel *Night Visits* was published in 1997 by Scottish Cultural Press. At present he is completing a new novel as well as a collection of short stories. He lives in Edinburgh with his wife and their dog.

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artwork by Wayne Burns



PETER CROWTHER CORNERED



It was my very great privilege on a dismally autumnal evening in late August to chat with Stephen King. But before anyone elevates my status up beyond its current street-level position (some might even amend that to 'bargain basement'), let me add that the meeting was hardly what one might call 'intimate'.

The occasion was a 'Meet Stephen King' event held at the Royal College of Art in London, put on by King's UK publisher, Hodder & Stoughton, to promote *Bag of Bones* (and, one might be forgiven for thinking, to celebrate Bangor's Finest staying put and not deep-sixing his British connection the same way he did with *Viking* in the US).

Despite the fact that pretty well everyone in the industry was there, I did manage to shake his hand and blurt out a few words — far from memorable ones, I might add — before retiring to the bar (again!) to reflect on just what kind of a *world* we would have (never mind the horror industry itself) if Mrs King (either of them, his mother or his wife) had persuaded the then presumably impressionable twenty-something to scrap his tale of a 'gifted' but emotionally disturbed girl approaching her first menstruation, and stick to his knitting: the last thing — surely to God — the world needed was another aspiring novelist...and teachers are always in demand (if rarely appreciated).

The thing is that King has exerted his influence and his popularity on a whole host of things, often things outside the spheres of horror and suspense fiction. Thus, in addition to his verbal nods of approval towards the work of innumerable writers and their various books, we've had sleeve notes to Al Kooper's *Rekooperation* album from 1994 and a nicely observed foreword to the *Best of the Forties* volume in the *Archie Americana* comicbook compilation series published in 1991. And that's to name but two.

It becomes fashionable in many quarters to knock down the icons we so painstakingly build up, and there have been signs of late of some folks taking it upon themselves to decry King's more recent work as being little more than a pale imitation of his early successes. Even King himself has hinted at the possibility of getting out while the going is good and avoiding the embarrassment of becoming a parody of himself.

Such a course of action is unthinkable.

Like everyone else on the planet, King has his off-days — the concept of the *Maximum Overdrive* movie, for example, must surely have occurred during a period in which our hero was laid low by a virus-collective containing every ailment known to mankind. And the on-screen execution of that concept undoubtedly occurred during the incoherent tertiary stage. But so much of King's recent work (most notably *The Green Mile* plus *Bag of Bones* itself) is just as exemplary as anything he has ever done that the very idea of his bowing out is thoroughly depressing. We can only hope that the adulation which greeted his appearances in England — not least my garbled 'Hi, I'm puh... puh...Pete Crowther' — gives him pause for thought.

But while there will always be a publishing home for King's output, the same cannot be said for other luminaries in the increasingly 'persona non grata' field of horror fiction.

Coming on the heels of Stephen Gallagher's and Ramsey Campbell's inability to find suitable UK publishers for their work, the news (unveiled at the FantasyCon held in Birmingham in September) that Stephen Law's relationship with Hodder & Stoughton has effectively been terminated does not bode well for the field of horror fiction in the UK. And this scenario is further clouded by speculation that the future of Jones's and Sutton's annual *Dark Terrors* collection — surely the short-story flagship of the field, and one which has been going from strength to strength in recent years — is by no means certain.

While the so-called 'law' attributed to Theodore Sturgeon (namely that 90% of everything is rubbish) is perhaps a little extreme when applied to current work being released under the catch-all of 'horror', there's no doubt in my own mind that the past couple of decades have seen a substantial amount of low-quality fare served up to the reading public. That that public seems to have responded by giving the cold shoulder to *all* horror fiction, as is alleged by some quarters in the industry, is both unfair and inaccurate.

The truth is that, whatever the genre, there are really only two types of fiction: 'good' fiction and 'bad' fiction. Publishers reacting to an alleged growing public disinterest in the material they're putting out under the horror banner — material which, it often seems to me, only finds its way into bookshops by accident (if it finds its way there at all!) and with nary a word of marketing back-up — by cutting horror lists back so drastically is tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Of course, the blame cannot be laid solely at the publishers' door.

The marked lack of interest in the field (unless the name on the book is King or Koontz or Barker or Rice) shown by the quality broadsheets is a travesty, as are the so-called book reviewers of these publications who so stoically turn up their literary noses at anything even resembling entertainment. When we get to a situation in which Ramsey Campbell's latest novel is published only in the US (as it has been just these past few months) — which, for me, would be like Dickens or Shakespeare (also simple entertainers of their day, with nary a Booker Prize [or its equivalent] nomination in sight) having been published abroad before enjoying similar treatment in England — then it's time for some serious head-scratching in all quarters.

Talking of the FantasyCon — and on a final and lighter note — I'm pleased to say that I'm almost recovered from the curious experience of seeing my own short story nomination (a collaboration with James Lovegrove entitled 'Even Beggars Would Ride', which appeared in this magazine) beaten by 'Wage Slaves', the story Chris Fowler wrote specifically for my *Destination Unknown* anthology (published in the US by White Wolf) and which Steve Jones and Jo Fletcher reprinted in their *Secret Tales of London* booklet for 1997's World Fantasy Convention in London. Talk about 'irony'!

So Chris, if you're reading this, next time I ask you for a new story...don't make it so damned good!



Joyce Carol Oates has been hailed by John Updike as 'one of America's most prominent women of letters'. One of modern literature's most prolific novelists, she has turned out thirty-six novels in thirty-four years, as well as numerous short story collections, essays on literature and boxing, and has edited many anthologies. Even at 60, when most people might consider slowing down, Oates still has numerous novels awaiting publication, is working on a new one chronicling the life of Marilyn Monroe, and still teaches creative writing at Princeton University.

In a rare UK appearance Oates was here recently to promote Virago's new editions of her novel *Man Crazy* and modern classic paperbacks of the earlier books *Solstice* and *Expensive People*.

In many ways *Man Crazy* is vintage Oates material. It tells the story of Ingrid Boone and her life in northern New York State. Her family would be described as poor white trash, trying to eke out an existence without settling in one place long enough to establish any roots. Ingrid is hauled from town to town by her mother, a woman who can't support herself except by leeching on men who are out for what her body can give them. Ingrid's father is mostly absent, a burnt-out Vietnam Vet on the run from the authorities. The book chronicles Ingrid's life on the move and into adolescence, and eventually into the arms of a crazed gang of Hell's Angels. There she is sexually abused, drugged, tortured and made to drink the blood of a murdered man. It's grim, but as Oates says, 'Hell's Angels are very dangerous and very real. I couldn't have a soft narrative about these people. I had to be true to the subject matter'. At the same time the book has a redemptive conclusion, something notably absent in many of her other 'realistic' narratives, such as the hugely successful novella *Black Water* and the awesome novel *What I Lived For*.

What I Lived For tells the story of shady businessman Jerome 'Corky' Corcoran and the events in which he becomes embroiled over one Labour Day weekend. It is a staggering portrayal of the male psyche and I asked Oates what kind of research she had done in order to achieve such a powerfully realised character.

'I did some research for it but the character is someone I really know very well. He's fictional but he's based on people in my family who are part-Irish, and certain of their male sensibilities. Corky Corcoran is the type of man who was one of the first subscribers to *Playboy*. He's very macho and we would say he has an average male sensibility. He's not intellectual. He's canny and shrewd and intelligent, but he's not intellectual. He reads science, he's always trying to improve his mind like a lot of American men feel they have to do, and, as I say, he's the kind of man who would read *Playboy* without irony. Part of the novel was excerpted in *Playboy* so I feel kind of vindicated. Corky has all these sexual adventures and they are all sort of comic and they all sort of go wrong. Yet he's so idealistic he still thinks of himself as very macho. I really love Corky myself and when I was interviewed by a feminist magazine the interviewer looked at me and said with disgust, "How could you write about that male chauvinist pig?". I was so hurt, I really felt that I loved him like an Uncle. So the novel is very close to my heart but it was a difficult book to write because it is so intricately plotted.'

One of the most remarkable things about Oates's talent is her ability to write across all genres and experiment with different forms of literature. Which does she actually prefer?

'Whatever I'm currently working on. I teach creative writing at Princeton University and I always encourage young writers to begin with short stories and this will help them fill their narratives out into a novel. I know James Joyce's *Dubliners* is not a novel but it has the *feel* of a novel, it has a kind of solidity to it. There's no story called 'Dubliners' in it so in a way it's like an experimental novel where each of the stories Joyce wrote when he was very young add up to a vision of a city, so it has a novel-like structure. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio* is also a novel based around self-contained short stories.'

'I like to experiment with all kinds of form, so I have novellas like *Black Water* and *First Love* which are really quite short. These are not only shorter, they're easier to write. They're easier emotionally and psychologically and when you're trying to write you have to be very careful of your own psyche because it can be very disruptive. You can be very unhappy and nervous when you're

HER HEART LAID BARE

Joyce Carol Oates interviewed by Robert Parkinson

writing. You can also be very anxious, but this can be a sign that the writing is important. But if you're *too* anxious and you can't sleep, which has happened to lots of writers, then that can be too disruptive. I try to lead my young writer students to a way of writing where they're getting a good stimulus from the unconscious so the writing is exciting to them but they're not anxious, or they're not actually getting nightmares. I think any kind of writing that's too bland, too easy, is not going to be worthwhile, but it can be like playing with fire.'

Oates is known as a hugely prolific writer. Often she will release one novel a year, and a collection of short stories, and occasionally throw a pseudonymous novel into the mix too. So how does she do it? When does she sleep, or teach, or do anything else, given her massive output?

'Well, I don't seem very prolific to myself. It seems like I'm always revising. I write fairly slowly, I write a paragraph then I look at it and write it over again. I would really like to write a whole manuscript and then revise it but I don't seem able to do that.

'I spend a lot of time daydreaming and thinking, and trying to get the structure of the work like a movie in my head. So, I'm working on a novel now and I know it's about 600 pages long. I'm trying to dream it out and see the whole thing, all the scenes. You can see you're at, say, chapter 11 and you work through to the very end and then you have your final scene and you see it somehow, inside your head, then when you start writing you are really starting to remember the movie in your head. At least, that has worked for me for a long time.'

'And something people don't seem to really believe is that I basically love writing. A lot of what is in *Man Crazy* is about my girlhood. Ingrid's father flies a small plane as my father did, and the book contains some of the romance of being a young girl, and especially a young girl surrounded by older men, and these things to me seem very poetic and lyric, and I really love writing those things very much.'

Have any of her books *actually* been filmed?

'A few. There was one called *Lies of the Twins*, with Isabella Rossellini, on TV here recently. The title of the book was *Lives of the Twins* but the "v" got lost along the way somewhere. I didn't have anything to do with that, and I've only seen about fifteen minutes of the film, it's just so painful. It's, shall we say, a typical Hollywoodisation of the novel, it's not recognisable as the original work. And then there was a movie of a novel called *Foxfire*. It had some interesting actors and actresses in it. It was well directed, but it didn't quite work. *Foxfire* is set in the 1950s but they had such a small budget for the film they had to set it in the 1990s because they couldn't afford to get old cars. The most successful adaptation is a film called *Smooth Talk* which has been around for a while now; it won some awards and Laura Dern made her acting debut in it.'

Under the name Rosamond Smith, Oates has released five novels. I like many of them, but they are distinctly different to Oates's 'own' books. Does she take chances with the Rosamond Smith books that she would not take with those released under her own name?

'Those books tend to be more cinematic than the Oates books. They lend themselves to film more easily and so they perhaps don't fit the Oates canon too well. *Lives of the Twins* was published as *Kindred Passions* in this country.

'Hell's Angels are very dangerous and very real. I couldn't have a soft narrative about these people. I had to be true to the subject matter'



MAN CRAZY

Joyce Carol Oates

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Courtesy of the publishers we have five copies of *Man Crazy* to give away to the first five current TIA subscribers who write in for one.

See also page 24 for a similar offer on Greg Egan's Luminous.

I don't know why they wanted to change the title. *Lives of the Twins*, with its evocation of lives of the poets, was what I wanted, but somehow over here they thought *Kindred Passions* would sell more copies, which I think was a mistaken judgement.

'There was another novel called *Nemesis* published in England and I remember looking at the dust jacket and just being completely astonished why anyone would choose this jacket cover. It showed one dead canary and another canary, and the dead one was lying on its back and I said really very respectfully, "Who do you think is going to buy this book?". And it seems to have been a prescient question because I don't think anyone did buy the book.'

Does she think the pseudonym a mistake then?

'Certainly I was upset when it was discovered. But many of our mistakes only seem so in retrospect. At the time it seemed like an exciting idea. But what happens in the world today is that we don't have the anonymity that Jonathan Swift had, or Voltaire, who I think had a hundred pseudonyms. Anyway, there are certain things like copyright, or registers at the library of congress, and that is how I must have been found out. My name doesn't appear on the copyright, but there are ways to find out who someone is if you are determined. Stephen King had a pseudonym and he was discovered through copyright. So really what I guess this adds up to is that it seemed like a good idea, but I didn't foresee how I could have been discovered, and so people have concluded it was a mistake.'

One of Oates's most commercially successful and controversial books has been the novella *Black Water*. It fictionalises the infamous drowning of a young girl at Chappaquiddick and Senator Kennedy's escape, and is viewed from the girl's perspective. It is a very powerful piece of work and I wondered if it had been as intense to write as it was to read.

'It certainly was a very intense novel to write. I would write 40 pages and distil it down to, say, 20 pages because I wanted it to be compact, like poetry.'

'The book is deliberately written in two parts. The first part only lasts five minutes in real time and the girl and the senator are in this car that goes off the road and into the black water, and the senator frees himself, he swims away, but the girl is trapped. The text is really very lucid and fast moving, and so the language has a daylight, starchy feel to it. The second part tells of the girl's gradual death and how she is thinking of her life. She is having more hallucinatory experiences as her oxygen levels fall in the pocket of air and so the sentences break down. They become very long, they're kind of sinuous and reflect the growing confusion of the girl as she gradually, and finally, dies.'

'So to me it was an experimental book that tries to give the reader a sense of the disintegration of language. It was an intense book to write, and an intense experience.'

Perhaps Oates's most celebrated achievement in fiction is in the 'Gothic series' of novels. So far four of the completed five books have been published, the most recent being *My Heart Laid Bare*, released in the United States earlier this year. Why has she been so extensively drawn to gothic fiction?

'Well, I've always loved writers like Poe and I read Stoker when I was about twelve which probably warped me forever. I think that when I started reading Lewis Carroll at 6 or 7, a part of me realised that Alice's adventures, which are surreal and really quite nightmarish, were something which celebrated the power of the human imagination. Carroll would not be considered a gothic writer but his vision informed me that it's the elevation of the imagination over everything else, over rationality or common sense, the idea that the imagination of mankind is just enormous and powerful, and that is what great gothic writing celebrates. I have a real affinity with that way of using the imagination and so it has come into my fiction extensively.'

'Realistic fiction is a different kind of project, a different strategy if you like. The whole idea of a realistic novel is to give it a world that is like a mirror and you should be able to trust the world that is presented to you. But the gothic sort of spins off from that real world.'

Oates, one of our most precious literary treasures, has said that the creative process is, at its core, unknowable. She simply does what she is driven to do by her creative instinct: 'The gothic and the realistic modes are very different, but speaking as a writer and a reader, I think we need both in our lives'.

the mark of the butterfly

alexander
glass

"A fine specimen, Ladies and Gentlemen, a fine specimen indeed. Well built, and muscular, as you can see for yourselves. He has no scars on him, nor any marks of disease; his teeth are in good condition. He understands both English and French, though of course he can't read or write. What's that, Sir? No, not Spanish, not this one. But just listen for a moment — you may find that his other qualities more than make up for that. He can fetch and carry, of course, like any of them; and he can chop wood, and all the rest of it. But he can also act as a waiter, and not only serve the drinks but mix them too, him having worked in a bar, before. He can drive a cart or a carriage, and even ride a horse, and take care of it as well — the animals aren't scared of him. He can play chess, and brag, and poker too. He can paint a wall or a fence without spilling a drop, and if you don't believe that, take a look at the warehouse wall behind you — that's his work. He can play the guitar, a little, and the mouth-organ too. He keeps himself clean without being told, and he can even speak a few words. There — what do you say? What am I offered? What's that, Madam? How did he die? I believe he was poisoned, in the bar where he worked. Of course, you'll have the death certificate along with your certificate of ownership, as the law demands. Now then: who'll start the bidding?"



Henry Daker listened to the auctioneer for a while, then lost interest and wandered away. He had been eating from a bowl of cold rice and shrimp as he listened, but threw it away, unfinished. It was too hot to eat; even now, during the night, the air was heavy and sour with the heat. Even breathing required an effort: he had to haul each breath into his lungs, like a weight. As the auctioneer's cries grew fainter behind him, Daker imagined the eyes of the dead man watching him. Suddenly unnerved, he turned to look back; but the man was gone. The next one was already up on the block, a woman this time, destined to be a domestic slave or some rich man's plaything. Her head was bowed, and Daker couldn't see her face; but he knew she was not the one he was looking for. He was glad it was not her.

Back there in the crowd, he had caught the familiar odour of the dead — not from up on the block, but from somewhere close to him. It was not an unpleasant smell, not the rotten stench they joked about up in the North: it was a sharp, dry scent, like cut grass. Daker had looked about him, a handful of rice held half way to his mouth, and seen one of them standing beside him. Right beside him, staring impassively up at the block. The butterfly tattoo was clearly visible on his cheek. For a moment Daker had thought, irrationally, that the creature was there to buy. Then he saw the chain hanging from its wrist, and realised the *animado* was there with its mistress. Perhaps it was to be replaced, nearing the end of its useful life. It didn't seem to care. Nor did it seem especially happy at the prospect of release.

His footsteps were taking him towards the French quarter, to the house of Emma Rombleau. It was late, of course, but she would still be awake. She slept during the day, and lived during the night, scribbling in her journal, listening to the sounds that floated over from the Brothel of the Dead, on the other side of the street, and emptying bottle after bottle of Sweet Medusa whisky. Daker doubted that she could help him, but she was always worth listening to.

Her door was open, and she was standing in the doorway in a long green dress, her unruly red hair spilling about her face. The moonlight silvered her skin, but seemed to deepen the scar upon her cheek. She nodded to Daker as he approached, then turned her attention back to the house across the street. Daker followed her gaze, but there was nothing to see.

"A man went in," she told him with a curl of her lip, "maybe ten minutes ago. I thought I recognised him."

"Who was it?" Daker asked, and felt a smile touch the corner of his mouth.

"Do you have any money with you? Do you have a golden guinea?"

"Yes. Why?" Daker reached for his wallet, but she waved him away.

"The man I saw — one side of that coin has his head stamped on it." Daker chuckled, not sure whether she was joking. She stared at him for a moment, as if offended, then laughed along with him. "Well, maybe I'm mistaken. Come on through, let me offer you something cold and wet: a zombie's kiss. Have you heard of that? That's what they call it in the bars. Actually it's just a double Sweet Medusa with a shovelful of ice." She poured as she spoke, handling the bottle with careless, practised ease.

"I don't go into bars, Emma," he reminded her. "At least, not those bars."

"No, I guess not." She sat back in her chair, drumming her fingers on the side of her glass. "So. Have you found her yet?" She shook her head. "Of course not. You wouldn't be here if you had."

Daker stared at the floor. "I haven't found her. Maybe I never will."

"You won't, if you keep looking in the licensed auctions. She won't be there, Henry. They'll be making her ready for the underground markets. Either that, or she's been shipped off overseas. Either way, she won't be on sale just yet. They have to break her in and train her. That takes some time. Then they have to get a false certificate of ownership." She stabbed at the air with a slender forefinger. "She won't be the person you remember. She won't know her name: they'll give her a new one. She won't remember you. I know you don't want to believe that; I know you're hoping that something in you will trigger a memory, a reaction. It won't. You're a good man, Henry, but you're not that special."

Daker shrugged. "So can you help me, or not?"

"Don't get ratty. I'm only telling you the truth. Yes, as it happens, I can help you. At least, I can introduce you to someone. A Powderman. He calls himself Seed, Jack Seed: a young fellow, but he knows his way around."

"How did you find him?"

"He came to me. He was curious. Bold, too — didn't get embarrassed, and didn't mind if he embarrassed me."

"Did he embarrass you?" Daker was amused by the thought.

"Of course not." Absently, she raised a hand to her face; her fingers traced the ragged shape of the scar on her cheek. "He'd heard stories about the dead turning against their masters, taking on lives of their own... Wandering off into the world, pretending to be ordinary people. Four of them escaped together, they say, and got all the way to Los Angeles, looking for the Powderman who made them. They were hunted down, and shot. All four." She laughed. "So Jack Seed had heard what folks say about me: that I'd had the butterfly tattoo removed from my face; that I'd killed my master when he tried to have his way with me, and shown a Powderman where to find his body; that I'd taken his money, and set myself up in this old house, waiting for death to come. Of course, they say other things about me, too. They say I have Negro blood in me — no offence meant."

"None taken." Daker rattled the ice in his glass. "What did you tell him?"

"The same thing I tell everyone. The same thing I'd tell you, if you weren't too much of a gentleman to ask: that it's none of your damn business." She grinned, and filled her glass again. "Anyhow, they say the *animados* only live ten years or so, and I've been here about that long. I ought to be dead by now."

"The amount you drink, Emma, I reckon you ought to be dead three times over."

"I'll take that as a compliment," she told him, amiably, and filled the glass up a little more. She looked at him very hard and said, "I think it's true about the dead turning against their masters. A few of them, anyway. The blue dust doesn't work on everyone the same way; on some, it doesn't work at all, and on others, it works, but only half way. Mostly that just means they die quickly, before they can be sold, even. But for a few, just a few, it might work a different way. I can believe it."

"And Lucy? What about Lucy?"

Emma lifted her shoulders. "Who can tell? You'll know when you find her."

"I did find her, once," he said, as much to himself as to her, "and then I lost her again."

He had sold up, sold everything he owned in Philadelphia, and come back home. He was still young, but he could easily have retired on the money he had made. So he sold his half of the business to his partner, and went back to Louisiana. At

first, he wasn't sure what he was looking for. The place had changed. There were more factories, more bars and clubs, more houses; but also more people out of work, with nothing to do but stir up trouble. Most of the new factory workers were *animado*. They were perfectly suited to simple, repetitive tasks. They could work on a production line for twenty hours at a stretch; they didn't want paying; they didn't go on strike. Rumour had it that the new Ford automobiles would be built by *animado* workers; cynics said they would probably be designed by *animado* workers, too.

Daker had bought a house that was too big for him, a house that reminded him of Lucy, and of the years they had spent together, growing up. He didn't realise that was why he had bought it, until one day a parcel arrived for him, a gift from his old partner in Philadelphia. It wasn't the gift itself that was important — though Daker was glad to be remembered — but the act of receiving it. He suddenly remembered how Lucy had run to the door, every time she heard the bell, hoping for a gift; and how she would come back into the house, holding the parcel proudly in her hands, smiling even before she knew what was inside.

That memory made Daker blink, and look about him, the parcel resting, forgotten, in his dark hands. He left it on the floor, unopened, and wandered through the house, understanding for the first time why he had wanted this one, and no other. The plan of the house was the same; it had the same proportions; it was built of the same smooth, dark wood. He realised he was even sleeping in the little room above the back door, where he would have slept as a child.

The next day he had set out for the old house, hoping to see Lucy again, though he had no idea what they could say to one another. But a pink-faced woman had answered the door, started at the sight of a besuited black man on the doorstep, and firmly shook her head to all his questions.

"No, she's not here now. We bought this house, just a few days ago. No, I didn't know her. But I know where she is now." She pursed her lips. "I guess it can't do any harm to tell you. She's buried in the cemetery on Redwater Hill. Her and her little brother both. No, I don't know how she died. Probably the fever. There's been a bad dose of it here, as I'm sure you know..."

Daker thanked her and left, hurriedly. He wandered the streets until the light began to fade, working up the courage to visit the gravesite. At last, as twilight covered the city, he found himself kneeling on the ground before a pair of headstones, plain and unornamented. One was a little smaller than the other. There was a tree just beyond the stones, its branches chuckling in the early evening breeze. In the heat of the day, Lucy's body would be shaded by it. She would have liked that.

He realised that his knees were damp; though there had been no rain, his suit was stained with dark, moist mud. The soil must be fresh, of course: Lucy had been buried only a few days before. But surely, Daker thought, it would have dried out in the heat by now. He leaned forward, examining the grave, his fingertips trawling the surface of the soil. Something glittered there: a tiny piece of bronze, cut into the shape of a butterfly. The marker of the Resurrection Men.

Daker had persuaded the authorities to dig up the grave. Reluctantly, they had done so, a pair of dead workers mechanically tearing away the earth with rusted shovels. The coffin had been empty. The two *animados* had stood beside it, motionless, until they were told to cover the grave again. Daker wondered whether they felt anything as they worked, whether some part of them still remembered being down there, in a dark place beneath the earth.

Emma Rombleau was smiling sadly at him, and he realised he must have been remembering out loud. The ice had melted in his glass. Feeling foolish, he apologised and got up to leave, but she came after him, placing a hand on his shoulder. Though she was smaller than he, and probably drunk, she was surprisingly strong.

"Come back tomorrow. Jack Seed will be here. He'll know where to find her."

Daker nodded, and fled into the street.

He didn't go home at once. Instead he went back to the market, and watched the dead being sold. He stayed there, while the money changed hands, until he could no longer keep his eyes open. Then he staggered home, at last, and slept through most of the day. He had seen no sign of Lucy.

When he reached Emma's house, he found that Jack Seed had got there first. There was an automobile outside in the street, with an *animado* chauffeur behind the wheel. That could only belong to Seed: few but a Powderman could afford an automobile, and no one but a Powderman could have found an *animado* who could drive. Daker paused in the doorway, listening to a man's voice, and a man's braying laugh, and began to form a picture of what Seed must be like.

He was not far wrong. Seed wore expensive clothes, and sported a heavy, though carefully groomed, beard and moustache. To the front of his hat was affixed a solid silver butterfly. Around his neck he wore a leather cord, from which was suspended a small black pouch, dusted with blue around its mouth. He fell silent for a moment when he saw Daker appear in the doorway; but only for a moment. "You must be Henry Daker." He offered his hand. "Jack Seed. Pleased to be doing business with you."

Daker nodded, but said nothing.

"Well, now." Seed ran a pink tongue across his lower lip. "I understand you're looking to buy a servant. And not just any servant, but one particular individual. An *animado* woman, is that right?"

Daker nodded again. He found himself reluctant to tell this man any more than was necessary. It was not that he had taken a dislike to Seed, but that he felt, somehow, as if he would be losing a part of Lucy if he spoke about her. His knowledge was all he had left of her; if he gave that away, he would have nothing. But he had no choice. Seed would surely be unable to find her unless he knew what he was looking for.

"All right," the Powderman was saying. "First things first. What was her name?"

"Lucy," Daker said, and his jaw fell stubbornly shut. He didn't want to make it easy for Seed.

"Well, now, I need just a little more than that."

"Lucy Daker."

"Daker? Was she a relative of yours? A sister?"

"No."

"Your wife, then? You know, it isn't legal to buy kin. I'd have to charge you just a little extra for that."

"No. She was a white woman."

Seed laughed. "Obviously not a sister, then, or a wife. Let me guess: she was your master's daughter, before the *animados* were made legal and slavery was ended."

"That's right," Daker acknowledged, coldly. Something about the man's manner made him suspicious.

"And why are you so dead set on finding her?"

Daker shook his head, slowly.

Lucy's father had died some years before, leaving her to look after her brother, then still only a baby. Daker remembered that day, more clearly than any other. Lucy had come down

the stairs, slowly, one deliberate step after another, as if afraid that she might fall. She didn't cry. She sat at the bottom of the staircase, not crying, and Daker knew at once what had happened. She looked up at him, and said, slowly and carefully, "You're all to be freed. Everyone. I'll arrange the papers as soon as I can; whatever has to be signed, I'll call a lawyer in and sign it. But as far as I'm concerned, you're all free as of the moment my father died."

Seed was frowning. "I guess it's none of my business. The name should be enough for me to find her. But I charge a high price: seventy guineas. Payable in advance."

"All right." Daker shrugged, and counted out the money from his wallet. Seed stared at him.

"Look, Mr Daker, I don't know whether you understand about the dead. Before I take your money, there are a couple of things you need to know. First, the *animados* aren't human any more — that's why they don't have any legal rights. They're human bodies controlled by a parasite host. Second, the host isn't a human host. It isn't even an animal as such, but a kind of fungus.

"Nine stones fell from the heavens and landed in the Mojave desert. Each one had some blue dust inside it: the dried form of the fungus. We're not sure what it is, nor where it comes from; we only know that it works. More than anything, it's like a kind of yeast. As we Powdermen say: 'Yeast to raise the bread, dust to raise the dead.'" He coughed.

"I would sooner believe a Yankee professor would lie than that a stone would fall from Heaven," Daker replied, quoting Thomas Jefferson.

"Well, you believe whatever you like. As for me, I'm quite happy to take your money" — he did so — "and leave. A good night to you both."

He left, and a few moments later they heard the sound of his automobile driving away. A long silence followed, broken only by the clink of ice in Emma's glass.

"He was making fun of you," she said at last. She sighed, and lowered her eyes. "He already knew her name: I told him."

"What do you mean?"

"She's here. Lucy's here, in the next room." Emma was trembling. She refused to let Daker see her face. "Call her."

Daker called her; and she came.

She followed him home, keeping two steps behind him, and matching his pace: if he speeded up, she speeded up; if he slowed down, she slowed down; if he stopped, she stopped, two paces back. Daker would have ordered her to walk beside him, but it was hard to give her orders. He had obeyed her father's orders for the first eighteen years of his life. Lucy had only ever given him one order, and he had obeyed at once: she had ordered him to leave, and to claim his freedom. He had never really understood why she had done so; she could easily have sold the slaves, if she didn't want them. Daker himself would have fetched a good price. He could only assume that she knew the slaves too well, that she had thought of them as people. She had refused to own him. And now he owned her: the certificate of ownership was rolled up in his pocket, taken from the table, where Seed had left it. It was false, of course. Lucy had been illegally exhumed; she had probably risen under the hands of an unlicensed Powderman. She bore no butterfly tattoo upon her cheek. Daker was grateful for that.

It was as Emma had warned him: this was not the woman he remembered. Her easy, unassumed grace was gone, and she had become clumsy, ungainly, like most of the dead. Her skin was cold. She bruised easily, and healed slowly. She

could not speak, nor laugh, though her voice was what he remembered best. Her mind was dulled, her breathing harsh. Worst of all, she didn't know him. He spoke to her, recalling everything he could, describing every detail of the old house, and of their old life within it. There was no response. Lucy sat and listened, unmoving and unmoved, seeming not to understand. He watched her for some sign of comprehension: there were moments when he thought he could see a flicker of light in her eyes, or a movement at the corners of her mouth; but a moment later, he wondered whether he could have imagined it. It must have been wishful thinking on his part, the result of wanting a response so badly that he interpreted every random movement she made as a sign of understanding.

He knew what he wanted: he wanted to be able to release her from her servitude and from her suffering, as she had released him. But he could not. He doubted she would understand what he meant, if he told her she was free. She would simply stare at him, as he had stared, uncomprehending, on hearing those words; but where his incomprehension had given way to understanding, hers would simply remain, until she forgot about it altogether. He could order her to leave, but she would not be safe if she did so: she would be at the mercy of the first person who realised what she was. In any case, Daker knew he didn't want her to leave. He had rehearsed the order, in his head, and then before a mirror, but he could never bring himself to give the order face to face. There would be no hurt in her eyes, only blind obedience. That would be unbearable.

The only other release for her was death. Daker had thought long and hard about this. His revolver would do the job well enough, and the act itself wasn't difficult. But he never seriously considered ending her life in that way. If he could not even order her away from his side, he definitely could not bring himself to murder her.

So he kept her in his house, and tried his best to make her comfortable and content. There was little he could do. She wanted nothing. When she was hungry, she ate until she was full, of whatever was placed in front of her. When she was tired, she slept for a few hours, and then awoke once more. When she was awake, she seemed perfectly happy to do nothing, to sit staring at the wall, or into empty space. If Daker gave her no orders, she did nothing; so he began to give her tasks to perform, out of a sort of desperation. He could see no way out. She would never recover. He could never kill her, though sometimes he wished he could. She would simply continue, in this pale shadow of life, for a few years, and then she would die.

At times, he thought she was beginning to show signs of life: she would perform a task differently to how he had ordered it done, or she would do something he had never ordered at all. He tried not to raise his hopes. It was always possible that she had misheard, or misremembered; or perhaps he was not paying enough attention to the orders he gave her. At the same time, he was a little frightened. There were more rumours of *animados* disobeying their masters, even attacking them. There was even talk, incredible though it sounded, of an organised rebellion. Daker paid little attention to rumour, but he resolved to stay on his guard.

He came to a decision some weeks later, when Lucy cut her hand on a kitchen knife. The wound bled only a little, but refused to heal. Daker tended it carefully, washing it and changing the dressing twice a day, without any noticeable improvement. He could not take Lucy to a doctor, or it would be discovered that she was unlicensed, and she would be destroyed, and he would be arrested. So he went to Jack Seed instead.

"Mr Daker, if your...servant has a medical problem, I can certainly recommend someone to help. Someone discreet. But are you sure that's what you want?" He raked his teeth over his bottom lip, with a look of distaste at what he was about to say. "Maybe I could buy her from you. At used rates, of course. I could find her a good home. I don't normally do that — I've never suggested it to anyone before. But look at you, Mr Daker. You're a mess. Emma Rombleau tells me your life revolves around Lucy. That isn't right. You have to let the dead go, Mr Daker."

"Yes. I know." Daker sighed. "I wanted to end her life, but I couldn't do it." He looked up at the Powderman, hopefully. "You don't know anyone..."

"I'm afraid not. I don't hold with killing them, unless it's absolutely necessary. Now if she were misinterpreting orders, or acting irrationally..."

"She is. Does that make a difference? Does it make her dangerous?"

"Possibly. I'd like to see for myself."

"And if she is dangerous," Daker said, feeling like a traitor, "will you do what's necessary?"

Seed looked at him for a long time, and then looked away. "I guess you haven't been reading the papers. They found more *animados* posing as humans. People are scared. The police are likely to arrest anyone who has a scar, or who seems a little slow, or a little clumsy. And runaways are to be shot on sight." He fingered the little black pouch at his throat. "Business is bad."

When they reached Daker's home, Lucy was gone. Daker hunted through the rooms, hoping she was merely asleep somewhere, knowing she was not. She was not in the house, nor anywhere in the garden. She had no possessions; Daker had given her things, but she hadn't understood that they belonged to her. It was almost as if she had never been there.

Seed was waiting for him outside in the street, checking the barrels on a pair of silver pistols. He stared at Daker, and lifted his brows. Daker could only nod, reluctantly, in agreement. They would have to search the streets until they found her. Part of him hoped they would not find her, that she had escaped for good, perhaps making her way north; or, if they did find her, that the Powderman reached her before he did. He looked at Seed, and reached for the revolver hidden in his coat. It felt very heavy in his hand.

The light was fading, and it was beginning to rain. Daker stumbled through the streets, squinting through a grey veil of falling water. There were dark shapes moving through the rain, maybe human, maybe not: Daker couldn't be sure. He and Seed went in opposite directions, the better to search for Lucy. Daker realised they had little chance of finding her if the downpour continued. Warm rain washed over him, soaking him to the skin, sending clammy fingers creeping down the back of his neck, crawling into his eyes and mouth.

The sound of a gunshot reached him through the rain. Daker turned his head, trying to discover where the sound had come from. A second shot followed the first, and then a third. Then there was a long silence, with no sound to be heard but the endless sighing of the rain. Daker walked into the silence, hoping he was going in the right direction.

There were fires in the French quarter. A gallows pole had been set ablaze, and the greedy red flames lit up the streets, throwing flickering shadows across the walls of the houses. No one was fighting the fire; the streets were empty. There was no sign of Lucy. Daker watched the noose swing back and forth, flames creeping along its length, until the rope burned through and it came crashing to the ground in a

shower of sparks. Further away, a house was burning, great red tongues of flame licking at the air.

A movement at his back made Daker spin around. A figure stood on the edge of the street, a figure in a long green dress, with red hair clinging to her shoulders, and a shapeless scar on her cheek.

"Henry. Where are you going?" She came closer, shielding her eyes from the glare of the fire. "It's me, Henry. Emma Rombleau. Have you forgotten me, after all these weeks? Or don't you recognise me without a bottle in my hand?"

Daker found his voice. "I'm looking for Lucy. She's disappeared. Jack Seed is helping me."

"Jack Seed helps no one but himself," she snorted. "And you're wasting your time. Lucy is better off where she is — wherever she is. You can't help her, and I know you can't bring yourself to shoot her."

"Seed might."

She laughed. "Seed would no more shoot her than he would shoot me — or you. I found out the truth about him."

"What..." Daker began, but then shook his head and asked instead: "But why are you here?"

"Something's happening. I heard strange sounds from the Brothel of the Dead. I couldn't understand what they were; I can't describe them to you. I waited a while, standing in the doorway, but there was nothing to see: they kept the shutters on the windows closed. Then the sounds stopped, and for a long time there was nothing but silence." She sighed, tasting rain and bitter ashes on the air. "Then they came out: all the dead whores, ten or twelve of them. All of them died young. One or two weren't much more than children. They crossed the street, but ignored me, and went away westwards. They weren't just wandering, without a purpose; they were going somewhere. I stayed a while longer, watching the brothel. None of the clients came out. I didn't have the courage to go in there, and see what had happened." She stared very hard at Daker, the firelight dancing in her eyes. "Before the *animados* became legal, there were a few whorehouses where ordinary working girls would be made to act the part of dead girls. They had to act dumb, but obedient, and do whatever they were told; they had to have the butterfly tattoo on their cheeks. You don't see those girls much, any more."

Daker could think of nothing to say.

"They're burning all the places they hate," Emma continued. "That house over there — that was a Powderman's house. Then the gallows; though not many were made at the gallows. The bodies were too badly damaged."

"Where are they going?"

"Who can say? We can only follow them, to find out."

The trail led away from the French quarter, past burning factories and sweatshops, building works and brothels, freakshows and baiting pits. The railway station had been burned, the sleepers torn from the ground and broken. Further on, a set of stocks lay smouldering on the ground. Of the dead themselves there was no sign; they had done their work and moved on. Daker was beginning to have an idea of where they were headed: the trail led towards the old slave market.

He wondered whether Lucy was part of this uprising, and how she had come to learn of it; and he wondered whether she hated him. She had seemed incapable of emotion, as did all the *animados* — and yet they were giving vent to their hatred, all the way across the city. Daker had treated Lucy well, as well as he could; though he knew in his heart that this meant nothing. It was not the work itself that mattered. It was the very fact of servitude. Daker cursed himself, silently, for not having realised this earlier, and for having fallen so easily into the habit of owning another human being.

From beyond a row of dark, deserted warehouses, they heard the sound of a whistle, and a command being given. Daker doubted that these were the dead; most likely the army had been called in to deal with the rebellion, and were closing in on the slave market. He wondered what would happen if the soldiers saw them: a black man in expensive clothes and a red-headed woman with a scar upon her face. Perhaps they would pause for a moment before opening fire; perhaps not.

Keeping close together, the two of them edged their way past the warehouses, to the edge of the market. The *animados* had gathered there, in silence, around the blocks. Some still carried the torches they had used to burn their way through the city. Daker thought he recognised a few of them, from his nights spent watching the auctions. Some had been up on the blocks, others in the crowd, chained to their masters. Those chains still hung from their wrists, glinting in the torchlight.

There were over a thousand of them. Most were from the city, but a few must have made the journey in from outside: Daker saw miners in the crowd, and workers from the railroad. His eyes moved over the empty faces until he found the one he was looking for. Lucy was there, on the far side of the market, standing as silent and motionless as the rest. Daker fought back the urge to move, to fight his way through the crowd towards her. If Emma Rombleau had not kept a firm hand on his shoulder, he might not have been able to stop himself.

A figure was moving through the crowd; Daker was too far away to see him clearly. Then the man climbed on to one of the blocks, lifted on the shoulders of the dead, and the torches lit up his face. It was Jack Seed.

Daker realised, now, why Seed wore a beard. He turned to Emma, who nodded in answer to his unspoken question. Seed was one of them, one of the dead, walking freely amongst the living in the extravagant disguise of a Powderman. Perhaps, Daker thought, he really had been a Powderman in life, and had found what all the Powdermen were looking for: a way to preserve the mind after death, to go on living without becoming what the *animados* became. Whatever his method was, it had worked; and it seemed he had been willing to die, in order to test it.

Seed opened his mouth to speak, but never got the chance. A shrill whistle echoed across the market, cutting through the rain, and the roar of gunfire followed. Daker pressed himself back against the warehouse wall, as the bodies of the *animados* fell to the ground. They made no sound as they fell. He thought he saw Lucy fall, her body buckling, breaking, as the bullets found her. He saw Seed up on the block, kneeling now, the silver pistols sitting in his hands. Then he closed his eyes, and didn't open them for a long time.

When Daker returned there the next evening, there was no sign of what had taken place. The square had been cleared, and the auctioneers were running their usual brisk trade. Leaning back against the warehouse wall, Daker examined the newspaper's version of the uprising. The blame was laid squarely at the feet of Jack Seed, who was held to be a human, a renegade Powderman. His body had not been recovered; it was thought he had escaped, fleeing the city. There was no mention of the fact that the army had simply opened fire, without even attempting to recapture the *animados*. At the end of the report was a list of the dead. They had not discovered Lucy's name, but she was there, nevertheless: a human, somehow caught in the crossfire. Since she wore no butterfly tattoo, it was assumed that she had either entered the square accidentally, or been taken there by an *animado*, perhaps as a hostage. Without quite knowing why, Daker was glad she had been identified as human.

He folded the newspaper, and tucked it under his arm. Up on the block, there was another slave for sale, but Daker didn't look. He took a deep breath — the air was still dusted with ash from the fires of the previous night — and walked away, without a backward glance, towards the French quarter, and the house of Emma Rombleau. Behind him, the voice of a trader receded into the distance: "Another fine specimen, Ladies and Gentlemen, another fine specimen..."

Despite bursting onto the scene with consecutive stories in *Interzone* and TTA, and a number of other magazines, Alexander Glass remains reticent when asked for biographical details. All I can tell you is that he lives in London, and that he will return to TTA with an astonishing story called 'The Rain'.



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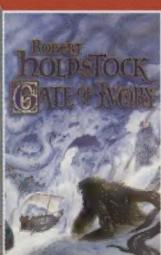


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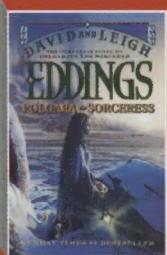
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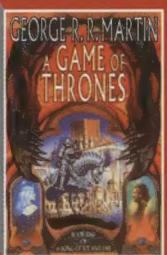
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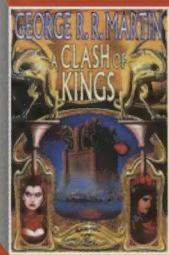
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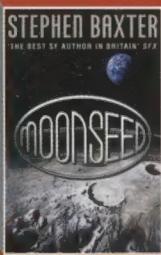
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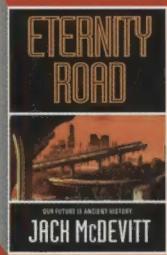
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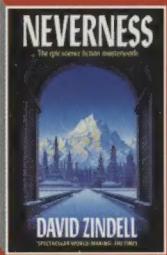
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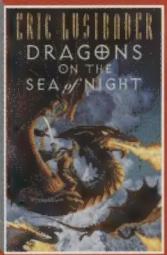
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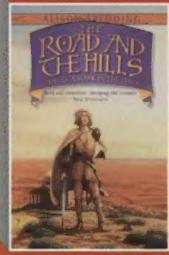
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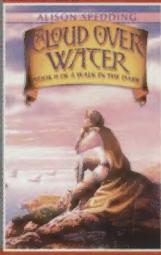
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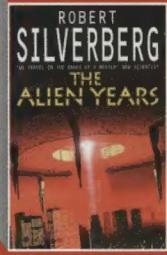
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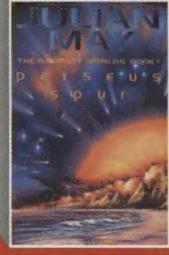
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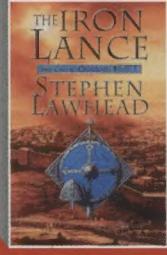
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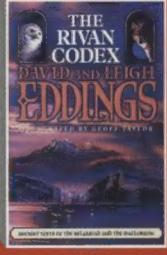
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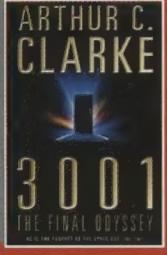
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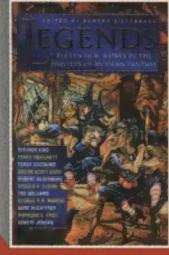
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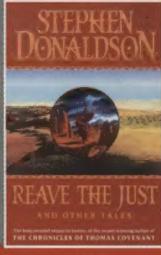
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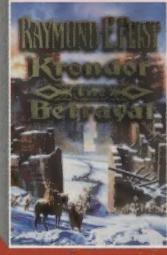
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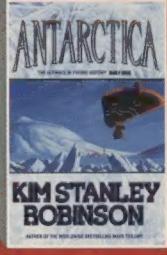
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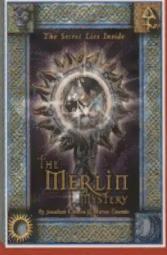
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Merry Christmas

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